

Jackson's War

Ray Rigby was hailed as an important new talent with his first novel, *The Hill*—highly successful as a book, and as the film which starred Sean Connery. In his new novel, Rigby continues the theme of the ordinary man in time of war.

Jackson is no hero; neither are his companions. Yet they all have the kind of indomitable grit that serves as courage when needed. Jackson is a major creation—a fully-rounded figure, tough, strangely compassionate, yet gropingly aware of the larger issues beyond his little world. The devastating experiences that shape his emerging philosophy, and lead him to make a dramatic challenge to what he considers to be the phoneyess of the army, make fascinating reading.

By the same author

THE HILL

RAY RIGBY

Jackson's War



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by

The Garden City Press Limited

Letchworth, Hertfordshire

for the publishers

W. H. Allen & Company

Essex Street, London WC2

Once again for you

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Ten days after the battle the non-fighting men appeared on the scene. The sky was grey and overcast and a piercing cold wind blew across the desert. A NAAFI mobile canteen slowed down then stopped abruptly and Corporal Johnnie Jackson wound down the cab window and stared at the burnt-out tanks and the hastily dug, shallow graves that covered the German, Italian and British dead, lying close to each other. He stared at the rifles and bayonets that stood erect above the graves and at the tin hats perched precariously on the rifle butts. Jackson was twenty-two years old. Six feet tall, slim, fair haired and handsome, and this was the first time that he had been anywhere near the battle zone.

The battle had been a minor skirmish, one of many, and the British had been successful. The tanks had gone in first, then the infantry with rifle and bayonet—smart, fit, brasses polished, highly trained. They all knew what was expected of them. Obey orders. Fight to the last man. This is war, chum. They marched on, glancing at the burnt-out and disabled tanks and the British, German and Italian dead, and the German and Italian prisoners squatting beside their tanks with their arms held high in the air in token of

surrender; then looking ahead they stepped round cases of ammunition, smashed guns, jumped over slit trenches, boxes of hand grenades and the dead soldiers' pathetic, personal belongings, scattered over the desert.

By late afternoon the medical officers and orderlies had arrived on the scene. They hurriedly bandaged the wounded and got them into ambulances. They worked well and did their best and remembered to say the right words when they had a moment to spare, but many of the wounded were either swearing horribly or screaming in agony, or vomiting, or too busy quietly dying to heed or care what was being said to them, and the British wounded and dying were not interested to learn that the battle had been successful.

John Thompson, the Padre, next appeared, on the scene. A handsome man with black hair, turning grey. He stood by the open graves and intoned the right words, beautifully, but the Italian, German and British, lying in their open graves with sightless eyes, did not hear the beautiful words. The Padre looked suitably sad as he listened to his beautiful voice intoning the right words over the open graves, then watched the sand being shovelled over the dead soldiers.

Staring at the burnt-out tanks and shallow graves, Jackson was surprised to discover that he was mentally trying to force himself to feel something deep and profound. Surprised because he knew that he should feel great pity, and respect, for the brave young men who had died fighting for the Fatherland, or the Motherland, or for ideals, or because they were ordered to fight and had not the courage to disobey a direct order, or did not even wish to disobey such orders. Jackson found himself thinking—You've got to respect them. I mean, you've got to take your hat off to these poor sods. Well . . . I mean . . . His mind went blank and he smiled and knew that he was lying to himself. Much as he would like to respect the dead soldiers he simply could not. Crazy, he thought. How can you let yourself be talked into it. It's crazy.

He turned to Sid, his driver, and said: "Let's take a look," as he jumped on to the soft wet sand then stepped round cases of ammunition, and, finally, stopped and stared thoughtfully at a

box of Italian hand grenades. He reached towards the box with the intention of picking one up and examining it more closely, but instead, he heeded a danger signal that warned him, don't touch it. Might be a booby trap. Sticking his hands deep into his pockets to keep them out of trouble, he moved slowly away, then noticed for the first time the dead soldiers' personal belongings scattered over the desert. He stared at a small pile of German and Italian kit. His driver joined him and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "It stinks," he said as Jackson straightened up and opened a wallet and looked at a photograph of a pretty girl. The rain had penetrated the wallet and the photograph was wet and slimy. The girl wore a bathing costume and had a beautiful figure and a fixed smile on her lips, her breasts were thrust forward and her stomach was held well in; she looked pleased with herself and at the same time faintly embarrassed. Just looking at the photograph made Jackson feel randy and he wondered who she was. He glanced at the back of the photograph but the rain had smudged the ink. Extracting a letter from the wallet he scanned it. "What a smasher," said the driver as he peered over Jackson's shoulder. "What a pair she's got, eh?" Jackson ignored him. He was trying to decipher the rain smudged writing.

"Any money in it, Johnnie?" enquired the driver.

"Where're you going to spend German marks?" said Jackson as he replaced the letter and the photograph back into the wallet and dropped it on the sand and buried it with the toe of his boot.

"If all the Jerry birds are like her," grinned the driver, "roll on Berlin."

Jackson picked up a pair of Italian boots. Not bad, he thought, nice and light. Look better than our old ammo boots. He carefully sat down on an ammunition case.

A Bedford truck stopped near the mobile canteen and ten NAAF men jumped out on to the wet sand, stretched their cramped limbs, then unbuttoning their flies, relieved themselves as they stared at the burnt-out tanks. Nobby, still buttoning up his flies, walked towards one of the disabled German tanks and the other men slowly followed him. Willie Watson, pushed past Nobby

and jumped on to the tank, and quickly disappeared inside it, then emerged holding a Nazi flag above his head. The NAAFI men laughed, cheered, and blew raspberries. Nobby climbed on to the tank, stroked his hair forward across his brow, stuck out his arm and gave a pretty fair impersonation of Hitler. The demented eyes, the strangled guttural voice. The NAAFI men laughed, jeered, whistled and blew more raspberries.

Private Green stuck his fist into a case of Italian grenades. They were painted red and looked like kids' money boxes at a first glance. Green shook the hand grenade close to his ear, then noticing a rubber tab, he pulled it, still staring with a puzzled expression on his face at the hand grenade. Then, not a moment too soon, he realised what it was, and with a 'yell of terror he threw it away with all his strength and it exploded in the air. Jackson and the driver threw themselves on to the sand and Nobby and Willie dived into the German tank. The rest of the men fled in panic towards the Bedford truck; they were all convinced that the war had finally caught up with them. Green quickly recovered from the shock and yelled with laughter as he threw hand grenades in all directions. Somewhat shamefaced, Jackson and his driver climbed to their feet and the runners stopped running and walked back towards the tanks and everyone shouted at Green.

"Stupid git!"

"Silly bastard!"

"I'll do you over, Frankie."

Green couldn't stop laughing. He was a fat moon-faced lad and looked like an overgrown schoolboy as he shook with laughter and exploded hand grenades against the burnt-out tanks, and soon half a dozen other men joined him and threw hand grenades in all directions. Then Nobby started screaming like Hitler again and Jackson watching the men thought, "The daft bastards," then quickly lost interest in them as he tried out his new boots. They fitted him well and were comfortable. He stared at a rifle as it slowly toppled over and moving to the grave, he savagely stuck the bayonet into the soft sand and replaced the tin flat on to the rifle butt. Nearby the hand grenades were exploding and Nobby

was still screaming like Hitler, and Willie Watson still held the Nazi flag aloft and the NAAFI men were laughing like hysterical kids.

Jackson stared at the shallow graves that covered the British, Italian and German dead, and suddenly shouted: "You daft bastards! You daft bloody bastards!" Then he shook his head because he was suddenly confused. He wasn't sure who he was shouting at, the unthinking NAAFI men or the dead soldiers lying in their shallow graves. He turned away and picked up a shirt and looked at the swastika badge on the pocket, then folded the shirt and tucked it under his arm as he walked back to the mobile canteen.

The driver started the engine and said as he glanced at Jackson: "That shirt stinks."

Jackson stuffed the shirt under the passenger seat.

"How far's Benghazi?" enquired the driver as he tooted the horn and drove away.

"A hell of a way to go yet."

"Why didn't you keep on the coast road then?" said the driver as he accepted a cigarette.

"I wanted to have a look at the war." Jackson turned his head to have a last look at the burnt-out tanks.

"Like what you've seen?"

"No."

"It stinks," grinned the driver. "I'm getting back on the coast road soon as I can."

"You bloody well do that," said Jackson.

Under a clear blue sky and brilliant sunshine Benghazi still managed to look drab, dull and uninteresting, but during the rainy season, beneath a grey sky, the once white buildings now pock marked and battle scarred looked squalid. The bomb-rutted roads oozed mud, and the Arabs, thin, dejected, grey faced, and dressed in dirty white gowns and ragged Italian army coats, hugged the buildings as they moved aimlessly about their capital city, but

this did not prevent them being constantly sprayed with mud churned up by the passing army vehicles. Benghazi at least, as far as the Arabs were concerned, was practically a dead town.

The harbour was littered with wrecked ships. A few shops were open but they had nothing of any value to sell. The market place, once a hive of industry, was now practically deserted. A few stalls displayed cheap trinkets, bracelets, brooches, tin cigarette cases, lighters and wallets, but a certain amount of bartering went on with the British troops. The Arabs paid good money for cigarettes, chocolate, old army uniforms, greatcoats and blankets, and many an army cook amassed a small fortune by selling the Arabs tea and sugar, but there was no love lost on either side. The Arabs expressed no joy at being liberated once again. An English Christian, as far as they were concerned, was no better than a German or Italian Christian. The English soldiers distrusted all Arabs on sight. They were nothing but a shower of thieving, bloody wogs. A half-starved dog warranted a certain amount of pity, but seldom a starving Arab.

The Italian barracks, a sprawling nondescript ugly mass of buildings, was the centre of attraction for the British troops. The NAAFI had opened a bulk issue store. This was intended to serve the Eighth Army with all the luxury goods that they had long dreamed about. Cigarettes, to be smoked or flogged to the Arabs. Beer and spirits, strictly for drinking. Soap, chocolate, razor blades, even luxury tinned foods. Every canteen sergeant, in the forward and base areas for many miles around, had been waiting since dawn. There was only one snag, which they soon discovered when the bulk issue store finally opened for business. The goods were strictly rationed. Stoney-faced NAAFI men, who were smoking themselves to death and seldom went to bed sober, recited the grim facts in flat colourless voices: "One bottle of beer per man per fortnight. One bottle of whisky, or gin, per officer per month. One half bar of soap per man per month, one tube of toothpaste per man per month. Chocolate? You joking, sarge? Two convoys sunk the other week, leaving Blighty. All we've got left now is

rowing boats. Three ships sunk the other day between Alex and Tobruk. Tough luck, eh, sarge? And don't forget the pilfering from the docks, mate. The wogs? 'Cause it's the wogs . . . who's a miserable bastard? You watch it, sarge, or go to the end of the queue. . . ." Angry canteen sergeants stamped out of the bulk issue store and told the news to their waiting drivers who started swearing.

Captain Black left his office accompanied by newly appointed Regimental Sergeant-Major Hart. He was confident that at long last he had found the right man. Hart, until recently, had been a sergeant in the Goldstream Guards. The Guards had loaned him to NAAFI. They didn't want him. Captain Black didn't know this, of course. Hart's colonel had thankfully sent him packing with a glowing testimonial. There were many things that Captain Black did not know, and how to maintain discipline was high on the list, but he felt very confident with newly appointed RSM Hart striding along at his elbow. This chap knows the ropes, he thought. If he's good enough for the Guards he must know the ropes, and if I know anything he'll make the bloody men sit up and take notice.

Inside the NAAFI bulk issue store the men were checking the latest consignment of beer recently received from the docks. Most of the cases were broken and damaged. Corporal Lynch jotted down the numbers as they were called out by a long-haired red-nosed gnome who had a very loud voice. "Sixteen . . . twelve . . . eight . . . four . . . twenty . . . thirty-one . . . key of the door . . . 'ere, this one's empty."

"Sweet nothing, eh?" said Lynch. "Blimey!"

Sergeant Wilks sat on a beer case smoking a cigarette. He registered suitable disgust as he glanced at Lynch. "Understand why NAAFI claim to be non-profit making, can't you?"

The men stopped work and laughed and Lynch called out, "Sarge, if the bleedin' unloaders on the docks don't take it easy there won't be a fiddle in it for us, will there?"

"Corp," said Wilks, "I hope you ain't serious." He looked at the men standing idle and shouted: "Get moving you lot."

The red-nosed gnome started shouting again. "Fourteen . . . Twenty-six . . . sweet eighteen . . . twenty . . ."

Captain Black and RSM Hart marched into the warehouse and everyone automatically stopped work again. Wilks glanced up at Captain Black and said, with his cigarette drooping out of the corner of his mouth: "More than half the stuff's been looted at the docks. How the hell we're gonna explain this I don't know."

"On your feet, sergeant," said RSM Hart with a steely look in his eye.

Wilks stared at him, clearly somewhat taken aback.

"I said on your feet, sergeant," said RSM Hart in a louder voice. "You stand when you speak to an officer, and you bloody stand when you speak to me so let's see you move, sergeant."

Wilks, completely taken out of his stride, stumbled to his feet. "Sorry, sir, I . . ."

"And take that fag out of your face, sergeant."

Wilks dropped the cigarette on to the ground and stamped on it.

"Straighten up. Stand to attention."

Past memories came to Wilks' aid. The two years he had spent in the Boys' Brigade had not been entirely wasted. He slammed his boots hard on the ground and straightened his back.

"Better. Supposed to be an NCO so start acting like one," said RSM Hart quietly. Then, turning to the men still standing idle and watching the scene with interest, he barked: "Attention. Now let's have that again and this time let's see you move. Stand at ease."

The NAAFI men, moving like zombies, shuffled their feet.

"Now, wait for the order and move when I give it. Attention!"
The men made a slightly better job of it this time.

Captain Black smiled and tapped his leg with his swagger cane. Jolly good show, he thought. He's not wasting any time. Through years of trial and error he had learned to ape the pukka public-school accent and could now make a fairly convincing job of it. He had even trained himself to think like a pukka chap. He never came out in the open completely and mentioned the playing fields of Eton, but he managed to convince quite a few people that he had been educated at one of the better public schools. Minnie Black, his mother, owned a small grocers' shop in Streatham and was very proud of her Fred. He had turned out to be such a real little gentleman, but his father had taken off in fright years before. Minnie was so respectable she nearly sent him mad.

Captain Black cleared his throat. "Stand at ease, chaps."

The men stood at ease and stared with suitable moronic expressions on their faces at Captain Black; they knew what was coming. One of his daft, bloody wet speeches. Captain Black pointed his cane. "You'd better meet Regimental Sergeant-Major Hart. You'll be seeing a lot of him from now on." Captain Black tightened his lips and forced his voice down a key when he spoke again. "Discipline!" One of the imbeciles facing him jumped and this pleased him. He jabbed the air with his cane to lend emphasis to his next remark. "Reason why he's here—discipline. To discipline you lot. To smarten you up. Mister Hart—but you will always address him as sir—means to warm you up. Now, I know all the arguments. You are in the army. You aren't in the army. The army doesn't pay you. NAAFI pays you. You're civilian paid. I know all the arguments. Well, let me tell you you're wearing the King's uniform, so you're subject to army discipline the same as everyone else."

He stopped speaking because he couldn't think of anything else to say, and snapped "Stand at ease." No one moved and he realised his mistake. "Attention," he shouted. The men came to

attention. "At ease," he snapped and the men stood at ease. He turned his back on the men and stared at Sergeant Wilks who was thinking, we are in the army, we ain't in the army. I wish somebody would make up their bloody minds and tell us what we are in. "You were saying, sergeant?" said Captain Black as he glowered at Wilks.

"Just received this lot from the docks," Wilks pointed to the broken cases then remembered to add "Sir."

"Have you, sergeant?" said Captain Black as he stared at the cases.

"You can see for yourself what's happened to them, sir."

Captain Black nodded and with RSM Hart walking at his side he inspected the cases.

Wilks, walking a pace behind them, said: "Our lads are doing it."

Captain Black turned round sharply. "Our chaps? Have you any proof?"

"I mean the Pioneer Corps, Service Corps. Everyone working the docks is fiddling."

"Not the wogs," said Hart with a sarcastic grin. "Couldn't be the wogs."

"And the wogs," agreed Wilks, "and the bloody Red Caps. They'll finish up millionaires, some of them."

"It's the wogs," shouted RSM Hart, who had collected two packets from wog bints in Cairo and could never trust them or believe in them again.

"I've said that," agreed Wilks. "The wogs too, but they don't get away with much, everybody watches them. No, sir," he added as he turned to Captain Black with a pleasant smile, and thought: you skinny, scrawny little bastard, you won't believe me anyway. "It's our lads, sir," he said. "They're the ones doing the real thieving. Worse than the fifth column, they are."

"It's the wogs, sir," said Hart. "Take the gold out of your teeth while you're asleep, and they'll not even wake you up, I know the wogs, sir, like the back of me hand." Every time he thought about

the wogs he got a pain in his crutch and it made him even more unreasonable than usual.

Captain Black nodded his head. "Quite right, Mister Hart, the wogs, of course."

"The wogs, sir," growled Hart.

"And the bloody British Tommy. Mustn't underestimate him, must we, Mister Hart?"

"No, sir, but I'll lay odds most of the pinching's done by the wogs."

"Sergeant," said Captain Black, "open every case. I want facts, figures. I want to know exactly how much stuff is missing and then I'll create hell about this." He marched out, followed by RSM Hart.

Sergeant Wilks lit a cigarette. He was a sixty a day man and spent half his nights sitting up in bed coughing his lungs up, yet oddly enough the cough seldom affected him during the day. "Stupid bastards," he said contemptuously. "If they want to play soldiers why don't they stand guard at Buckingham Palace."

"Mister Hart," sneered Lynch. "So he's the bloke in charge of discipline, is he? You watch out Scottie, or he'll have you on parade inspecting your bloomers."

Wilks grinned. "That an RSM? Bet you he was batman to a chinless wonder. Won't last, you know."

"Seen them come and go," agreed Lynch as he turned and looked at the men who were standing in a group swearing and moaning as they opened bottles of beer.

"Look at them," grinned Lynch. "Fancy trying to discipline that shower."

Wilks smiled and nodded his head. "No good trying to give them shock treatment. Only makes them run to the bottle."

Captain Black was in one of his brooding moods. All too frequently coherent thoughts would not take shape in his brain. Idiotic

little rejects would keep popping up to the surface and obscure the vital matters that he should be thinking about and dealing with. Thoughts like . . . Cold for flies. Still hanging around though, as his hand automatically struck out at a fly that was sniffing suspiciously at the inkwell on his desk . . . Soya sausages are made of cow dung . . . Something in my teeth . . . I think that I have never seen a poem lovely as a tree, suddenly hummed through his brain. Daft. I don't even like the song, Captain Black thought. Vera used to sing it . . . She was always singing it . . . Couldn't sing a note . . . No good in bed either . . . That girl now, with the brown eyes . . . Glasses . . . Pity about that . . . What was her name? . . . Sadie . . . Common . . . Common voice . . . Good shape. Going to recommend her to be a manageress. Couldn't though, could I? Shouldn't have promised her though. A guilty stab of conscience irritated him for a moment and he tried to dismiss it by taking another swat at the fly . . . He's paddling his feet in the bloody ink. Can't be . . . Couldn't recommend Sadie for manageress, apart from being common, that laugh. Like water flushing down the lav. Can't get much more common than that. Bad on figures. Careless. Let the lads have fags on tick. Too easy with them . . . Nice while it lasted though.

He glanced up at RSM Hart, standing ram-rod stiff, facing him across the desk. He's waiting, Captain Black thought, as he straightened up in his chair, and I'm the one who makes decisions around here.

"Mister Hart."

"Sir."

"Church parade this evening."

"Very good, sir."

"Service Corps, Pioneer Corps. REs, everyone will be going to church."

"That's right, sir."

"If the chaps can't attend church at Christmas, then they may as well pack in all pretence at being Christians."

"Agreed, sir. What about the Jews?"

"The Jews, Mister Hart?"

"The Jews, sir. Have you got any Jews?"

"Yes, we've got three Jews, no, four." Captain Black looked thoughtful. "They could be a problem. You'd better dig up a rabbi for them, I suppose."

"In Benghazi, sir? Highly doubtful."

"Suppose so." Captain Black pursed his lips. "Well, if they protest, better excuse them."

"Think they will protest, sir?"

"Goldstein would," said Captain Black. "That bastard never stops protesting. Solicitor's clerk in Civvy Street."

"Ah, barrack-room lawyer, eh, sir?"

"Yes. Think I'll post him. Better double the prisoner in." Captain Black turned to some papers on his desk. "What's his name?"

"Hawthorne, sir."

"Oh yes, Hawthorne. I'll deal with him."

While RSM Hart was shouting at the prisoner outside the office door, Captain Black concentrated all his thoughts on Hawthorne. Remember him, only arrived three days ago and already he's in trouble. Stationed in the West Country in nineteen forty. That's when I first set eyes on him. Launceston. The camp just outside the town. That's the place. I was Area Manager then. He'd been in France with the BEF, didn't leave via Dunkirk though. Oh no. Got out early. The sergeant in charge of the canteen at Launceston complained to me about him a couple of times and I had him on the mat. Never learn some of them, do they? Well, have to make it warm for him this time. Drink. That was the trouble. He glanced down at the charge sheet on his desk and smiled. Thought so. I'm seldom wrong. Drunk again. Well, this time I'll have to be hard on him for his own good. Can't have NAAFI men falling about drunk all over the place and making bloody fools of themselves. Gets us a bad name with the army. I'll be fair with him though. Always like to be fair. Let him give his side of the story. Oh, Christ! He stutters. Well, he'll just have to get it out as best he can, won't he? Captain Black stared at the prisoner, who was limply standing to attention facing him.

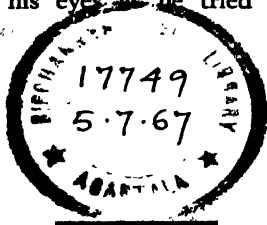
"105 Private Hawthorne, sir," shouted RSM Hart. "And keep

them shoulders back. Back, I said. Straighten your arms. That's better. Your thumbs, lad. Thumbs in line with the seams of your trousers. You ought to know. Shouldn't have to tell you."

Hawthorne gulped noisily and did his best to obey the orders and finally managed to co-ordinate his limbs and stand stiffly to attention and look for all the world like any other soldier. He was nervous by nature and tried desperately hard never to offend anyone when he was sober, but when drunk, he felt himself to be the equal of any man and all too frequently he tried to prove this by begging the toughest looking man in sight to step outside with him. He seldom won. On a few rare occasions his drunken fearlessness had made bigger men decline the offer, but, win or lose, he never bore a grudge the next day. He also loved to sing at the top of his voice, though few people could bear to listen to him and he also insisted on telling funny stories. Drink loosened his tongue to a certain degree, but his appalling stammer rarely entirely left him. He was a good-hearted, egotistical, nervous wreck of a man and most people managed to tolerate him. His life-long ambition when sober, and in his right mind, was to stay out of trouble but that meant signing the pledge and he dreaded even the thought of doing that.

"So you're Private Hawthorne, are you?" enquired Captain Black pleasantly.

Hawthorne stared at Captain Black with his mouth slightly open. Hadn't he, only three days previously, reported to this very officer and suffered an awful sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he recognised Captain Black, and then stammered his name and number, and hadn't Captain Black reminded him that they had met before, under somewhat unfortunate circumstances, and hadn't the bloody idiot stated, quite pleasantly, "I hope you aren't going to give me any more trouble in the future," and hadn't he replied with complete sincerity, "N-n-n-no, s-s-s-s-sir," and that had been that. So why was this lunatic pretending that he didn't know him? Hawthorne saw that Captain Black was impatiently waiting for a reply, so he contorted his lips while a strangled look crept into his eyes as he tried to utter a few simple words.



speaking reasonably well when he lost his temper or was drunk. "I st-st-stutter—can't get the words out."

"Refuses to obey orders, sir. Using abusive language to an officer," growled RSM Hart. "Both serious offences. Should book him, sir."

"Stand to attention," shouted Captain Black.

Hawthorne stamped to attention and stood ram-rod stiff and stared blankly at the wall.

"That's better," said Captain Black as he relaxed a little and switched on a tolerant smile. "Hawthorne, I accept the fact that you have an affliction, but the KR's clearly state that prisoners must stand to attention when they are on a charge."

"I-I-I-I-I-I-," stuttered Hawthorne.

"Know it's difficult for you," said Captain Black, "but you have my full permission to stammer."

The small hairs on the back of Hawthorne's neck tickled, then stood erect as he stared in horror at Captain Black's bland, smiling face, then, after a long moment the truth hit him. He's serious, he thought. He means it. I've got his full permission to stutter. He's pulling a Jesus Christ on me. So, I've got his full permission to stutter, have I? I daren't look at him. The light from his halo will blind me. He's all heart and loving kindness and sweet understanding and bounteous goodness and gleaming false teeth. Next thing he'll be feeding the mob with loaves and fishes. Dark rage was surging up inside Hawthorne's breast and nausea attacked his stomach, then a strangled scream that started in his guts echoed round the room and in a blind rage he up-ended the desk and trapped Captain Black beneath it.

The men halted on the order and filed into church. Private Goldstein was with them, surprisingly enough. He had been told by RSM Hart that he was being posted back to Cairo, and, overjoyed at this good news, he had forgotten to protest that no Jew in his right mind would be found dead inside a Christian church. Once inside, Goldstein suffered a momentary twinge of conscience,

but ruthlessly dismissed it from his mind. Hadn't he been ordered to attend church parade? He knew his King's Rules and Regulations backwards, and one of the golden rules was: obey the order then complain afterwards. Maybe he would complain. No, be in Cairo in a few days. Not worth it.

The church had suffered a certain amount of bomb damage and it was freezing cold inside. The congregation blew on their hands, and stamped their feet during the hymns to keep warm. The organ still worked and that helped to drown the sound of stamping feet. The soldiers sang in loud, flat voices. Made a horrible mess of Hark the Herald Angels sing, and other carols. Listened in a stupor to the sermon on charity, an unknown quality as far as most of the NAAFI men were concerned, then they thankfully filed out of the church and were marched back to the barracks. This event was RSM Hart's first NAAFI parade and even he, an old soldier who had had more than a few moronic soldiers to train in his time, was absolutely flabbergasted. Clearly the men had never been trained in even the rudiments of army drill. They slouched, marched out of step, talked in the ranks, and obviously could not understand or grasp the simplest drill order thrown at them. RSM Hart felt deeply ashamed as he shouted orders at the top of his lungs, and promised himself that he would have a word with Captain Black at the earliest possible moment. Must have them on parade, he thought. Must smarten them up. Disgusting. Never seen anything like it. Disgusting. He dismissed the men and they ran to the wet canteen.

Hawthorne was supposed to be under close arrest. Sergeant Wilks entered the guardroom. It was his kindly intention to give the sergeant of the guard a drink, but the only man in the guardroom was a somewhat dejected looking Hawthorne. Funny goings on, thought Wilks, as he began to cross-examine Hawthorne, who, after about a quarter of an hour of false starts and stops, eventually cleared up the mystery. It appeared that the sergeant of the guard had instructed the corporal of the guard to keep an eye on

the prisoner while he nipped out to have a couple of drinks with some of his pals. The corporal then instructed the guard to keep an eye on the prisoner while he nipped out. The guard discussed the situation for some minutes and then decided: to hell with this on Christmas Eve, and all made their way to the wet canteen, after promising Hawthorne a good drink if he stayed put and kept his mouth shut.

Wilks heard Hawthorne out to the bitter end then, with a kindly smile, poured a good stiff whisky into a tin cup, and handing Hawthorne the bottle made him promise to give it to the sergeant of the guard when he returned. To this request Hawthorne readily agreed, spluttering his thanks at the same time.

Sergeant Wilks, who had quite a good drink on him, warmed at once to Hawthorne. Above all things he wanted to be liked. On odd occasions he had overheard someone say: "Old Wilks's not a bad bloke," or "Old Wilks's one of the best," and this had sent him nearly mad with joy and given him a tremendous glow. One of his favourite sayings was: "Do a bloke a good turn if you can." Another favourite saying was: "Anybody can do you a bad turn." Brushing aside another outburst of thanks from Hawthorne, Sergeant Wilks said: "Don't forget now, Hawthorne, you haven't seen me, and see Tommy gets that drink." With this he threw Hawthorne a pleasant grin, and marched out, feeling at peace with the world.

Some hours later the men sat at tables in the wet canteen, bleary eyed, boozed up and still singing, but now they were singing all the dirty songs they knew.

Sergeant Pilgrim, serving behind the bar, was not amused. He was queer, but he hated vulgarity.

A table turned over with a crash and bottles smashed on the floor as Paddy stood up and pointed an accusing finger. "You, wasn't it? It was you, Charlie."

Charlie got to his feet and vigorously shook his head. "No, honest, Paddy, honest, wasn't me."

Everyone stopped singing and waited expectantly as Paddy moved relentlessly towards Charlie, overturning another table on the way. "He pinched my watch, the robbing bastard."

Men scrambled out of Paddy's way.

Charlie, backing towards a wall halted, and stood like a hypnotised rabbit, then Paddy punched him in the mouth and Charlie slowly slid down the wall and Paddy, fighting drunk now, turned another table over and glared insanely about him with his fists clenched, and shouted: "Any man fancy himself? Any man fancy his chances, step up."

No one stepped forward to accept the challenge so Paddy turned in a full circle and shouted, "You're not men, you're a lot of bloody queers, so you are. There's not one bloody man among you."

Ted Abbot stood up and shouted, "I'll bloody show you, you bloody mick," as he squared up to Paddy and they stood toe to toe thumping blows into each other. Meadows sneaked up behind Paddy and smashed a beer bottle over his head. He had wanted to square an old account for a long time. Paddy fell on one knee and blood trickled down his face and neck, then he shook his head and forced himself upright, but he was dazed and didn't know where he was. Abbot decided that Paddy was too far gone to put up any more resistance so he thumped Meadows. Sergeant Pilgrim started screaming: "Stop it! All of you, stop it!" More tables and chairs were overturned as men wrestled, punched, kicked, grunted, shouted and exchanged blows.

Johnnie Jackson, with Sergeant Jock Cameron, Terry Lynch and Willie Watson, watched the fight with interest from a table near the bar.

Sergeant Pilgrim left the bar and advanced on the fighting mob, pleading for order. Abbot hit him and Pilgrim fell over a table.

Cameron stood up and nodded to the bar and Jackson, Lynch and Watson followed him. Cameron poured four large whiskies and they all leaned on the bar and watched the fight.

The door burst open and RSM Hart and Captain Black rushed in. Hart started shouting: "Order, I'll have bloody order," as he

struck out with his cane. Cursing and swearing, he hit out wildly and finally restored order.

Captain Black surveyed the damage and turned a bilious eye on the men as they tottered to their feet, then he paced around the canteen and paused only to glance at Jackson and his friends who were once again seated at their table, then turning his back on them he faced the battered and bloody men. "Happy Christmas. Peace and goodwill to all men," he said bitterly.

Deadly silence as the men shuffled their feet uncomfortably.

Captain Black picked up a broken chair, looked at it, then violently threw it on to the floor. "Sergeant Pilgrim, where are you?"

Pilgrim, with a handkerchief held to his bloody nose, staggered towards Captain Black. "Oh, sir, I tried to stop them."

"I'm sure you did. I want a full estimate of the damage." Captain Black glared about him. "You'll pay, every damn one of you will pay. Pay for the damage. Pay for everything. Mister Hart, I want their names."

"I'll see to it, sir."

"I want the ringleaders. Sergeant Pilgrim, who started it?"

Abbot, standing a foot or so behind Pilgrim, said out of the corner of his mouth: "Open your trap and I'll kick you to death."

"Sir," said Sergeant Pilgrim, "it all happened so quickly."

"Very well. Mister Hart."

"Sir."

"I hold every man here responsible. The canteen will be closed until further orders."

"Yes, sir."

"I want them all on parade at 0800 hours tomorrow."

"I'll see to it, sir."

"Drill them and smarten them up." Captain Black glowed with an inner self-satisfaction as he marched towards the door. I've shown them, he thought. I've jolly well shown them who's in charge. He slammed the door shut noisily behind him.

Hart glared at the men. "I will, I'll bloody well smarten you lot up. Now, let's have your names."

2

The men wore full pack marching order and carried rifles and they marched out of step and the rifles pointed in all directions. They wore their packs slung low like parachutes and the packs bumped against their buttocks and almost every drill order shouted at them ended in disaster. They were the dirtiest, scruffiest, most deadly looking shower who had ever worn the King's uniform.

RSM Hart was trying to remain calm. These ain't the first men I've drilled, he reasoned with himself, but my gawd, these are the first lot I've encountered fitted with two left feet. The odd useless bloody article, yes. The odd dozy dopey swede-bashing country bumpkin can't tell his left foot from his right foot, impossible to train, stupid bastard, yes. But this shower, nothing to choose between. them. Bloody NCOs. Three stripes on their arms and nearly fall arse over tip every time they try to throw up a salute. I must be dreaming, he thought. I must be still in me kip having bleedin' nightmares. They don't even know how to wear their kit. If they don't learn soon I'll contact the air force and take them up

to ten thousand feet and push them out and let them learn for themselves if they're wearing bleedin' packs or bleedin' parachutes. Must keep calm, he thought, as he shouted the drill orders. You must keep calm, Harold.

"Left, right, left, right, left, right. My gawd, you can march in step, can't you? Little kids can. I've seen them waving little flags. Little kids can. You know your left from your . . . you know . . . don't tell me you don't know. In step. Left, left, left, left. Keep in step. Don't waggle your fat bums like a lot of brothel-bred whores, shoulders back. Heads up. Don't look down. Heads up. Keep in step. Left, left, left, left. In step. Keep in step! Every day, morning, noon and night I'll have you out." His voice rose to a scream. "Disgusting! Never seen the likes of it. Disgusting! Smell you from here, boozed up, punched up, poxed up. Smell you from here. What in hell's gates are you? You ain't men so tell me what you are. NAAFI tarts? Little rock cakes? Little brownies? You ain't men. Left, left, left. Keep in time. Pigs could do better. Pigs! Sheep could do better. Halt!" Some of the men halted but the others kept marching on. "Halt!" RSM Hart shouted again and dashed his cap to the ground. The men halted, then some of them decided to join the men who had halted on the first order. "Still. Stand still," thundered RSM Hart. "Don't move. Don't bloody move. I want you to stay right where you are. Can't believe the evidence of me own eyes. Must take a picture. If Rommel sees it he'll pull out of North Africa. He wouldn't fight bleeders like you. Go home in disgust first." He bent down and picked up his cap and replaced it on his head, then straightened up. "On the order I want the lot of you to Drop Dead!" He walked away in disgust.

Johnnie Jackson began to suspect that the human race was not all it was cracked up to be when he was only five years old. He was staying on a farm in Sussex, and the farmer's wife, a lovely lady with red apple cheeks and a huge warm bosom, gave him a kid as a gift. Jackson fell in love with it on sight. At first he was outraged when the kid insisted on butting him every time he turned

his back, but he was a fairly tolerant five year old and soon reasoned it out that the kid was only playing, and if butting him made his darling kid happy, then it was all right by him.

On the fourth day the kid was missing and Johnnie, in tears, went in search of the farmer's wife, but she was so busy and her answers were so vague that Johnnie decided that he would find his pet himself, and he finally solved the mystery of the missing kid to his everlasting regret. He was watching the pigs hogging and grunting around their trough and innocently asked the farmer what it was they were eating, and when the farmer cheerfully told him, he staggered away a few paces and was violently sick. From that moment on Jackson distrusted people in general and women in particular.

He was a brighter than average boy, but lazy by nature. At school he was usually near the top of the class but he was honest enough to confess to himself that it was not much of an achievement as most of the other boys were pretty dim. On leaving school he drifted from one dreary, badly paid job to the next. When he was sixteen he spent a few months standing on street corners with his friends, whistling at the girls, but all the time he felt this was a pretty foolish occupation. He reasoned it out that the whole object of the exercise was to get close to the girls, and by the time he was seventeen he was managing to do this with a fair amount of success. From fifteen to sixteen he was a great romantic. Girls were a sweet mystery. He loved to lie in bed and gaze at the moon. Girls were untouchable. They were beautiful like flowers, and easily crushed and hurt. Apart from the intense joy he got out of his romantic imagination it was a most unsuccessful year, but in later years Jackson sometimes regretted the passing of that one golden year and wondered why he could never recapture it again.

He read a great deal, mostly rubbish, but as time passed he stumbled on to some good books. He admired Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Sarayan, and Zola. He also read comics, the national newspapers, and discovered that he could hardly believe a word that was printed in them. He read all the posters on railway

stations and the advertisements in shop windows. The thought crossed his mind occasionally that perhaps he should be more selective in his reading. Perhaps one day he would write a book. Once, he even made the effort, but he soon discovered that writing was much more difficult than he had imagined. Things had to come easy to Jackson or he soon lost patience. Perhaps he would paint? He could easily imagine himself being acclaimed as a world-shattering genius, but he knew in his heart that he had no talent in that direction.

It was pleasant to day-dream though, and he held on with great determination to the conviction that one day he would be somebody. He knew that he had to do something startling one day. He wouldn't be a politician. Politicians were all phonies. He had no talent for painting, or boxing, and he would never be the fastest runner on two legs. Who wants to get out of a warm bed at dawn and go running around the park like a lunatic, for God's sake? Maybe a business tycoon. He knew he had the gift of the gab, and a great deal of charm. His biggest problem was that girls seemed to take up so much of his time. Well, what could be more pleasant? But one day he would have to seriously get down to something creative and shake the world. Meanwhile he was still young and life was meant to be lived.

By the time Jackson was twenty-two he was a happy cynic.

Jackson moved to the end of the mobile canteen and slammed the door shut and locked it, then, unstopping a bottle, he carefully sniffed at it and smiled as he glanced sideways at Cameron.

Sergeant Jock Cameron waited patiently. He knew Jackson of old. He's a great lad for turning everything into a bloody drama, he thought. You'd think it was a fine perfume, full of Eastern promise, or something. I'll give him a minute or two then jerk it out of his mitts and get down to some serious drinking. Jackson inhaled the aroma from the bottle and sighed deeply, then nodded his head slowly: "The bouquet," he said as he sighed again.

Cameron stared at the colourless liquid in the bottle with a puzzled frown. "What is it, Johnnie?"

"It's zibzib," said Jackson as he held up the bottle and gazed at it.

"And what the bloody hell is that supposed to be?"

"It's special, Jock. You wouldn't find this in a four-ale bar in bonnie Dundee."

"Aye, you may be right," said Cameron with a tolerant smile. "Are you planning to send yourself daft smelling it?"

"The Arabs make it," said Jackson.

A suspicious look crept into Cameron's eyes. "That's no recommendation, Johnnie."

"The secret goes way back into ancient history," said Jackson, who liked to impress people with his knowledge and never minded embroidering any subject that was being discussed. "They make this liquor from an old recipe handed down by King David, though there's a school of thought that thinks that Saul passed it on to him."

"King David comes from an ancient tribe of four by twos," said Cameron, "and all he'd ever pass on to the Arabs was the drippings from his nose."

"You didn't let me finish," said Jackson. "The Arabs got their hands on the only copy of the recipe then in existence. It's ancient history," he added airily. "I thought everybody knew it."

"I'd give my right hand for a bottle of Scotch," said Cameron.

"We haven't got any Scotch, Jock."

"Why didna you get some Scotch while you were about it?" grumbled Cameron.

"It was dark," said Jackson in a reasonable tone of voice. "So how the hell could I see what I was pinching?"

"Fair enough," Cameron said. "How many bottles did you pinch?"

"Six."

"Has this stuff got a kick?"

Jackson held the bottle under Cameron's nose. "Smell that."

Cameron pulled a face. "It smells bloody disgusting. What's it made from, aniseed balls?"

"Drink a bottle of this, Jock, and you start imagining that if you flap your arms hard enough you'll take off and fly like a bloody eagle."

"You don't say?" Cameron looked interested. "Must be the miracle drink of the age." He tipped the bottle and half filled his tin mug.

"A bottle and a half," said Jackson, "and you could go into action and win a double VC."

"Now I know you're talking pure daft," said Cameron as he poured a drink for Jackson. "Here's to me and my ain." He lifted the tin mug and then got the smell of aniseed up his nostrils. He stared at the colourless liquid dubiously, then slowly lowered his tin mug.

"But next day," Jackson slowly shook his head.

"What about the next day?" enquired Cameron.

"Don't go near any balconies. You get an irresistible urge to jump off."

"Aye, I'll remember to stay away from balconies," said Cameron.

"And you take water with it," said Jackson, as he poured water into Cameron's mug. "See how it clouds up?"

"Aye, very pretty," agreed Cameron. "But what the hell are we waiting for?"

All next day they lay on their backs. Two immovable, suffering objects.

Hawthorne was doing his best to stand erect as he leered at Captain Black.

"Stand to attention," said RSM Hart between his clenched teeth.

Hawthorne swayed gently on his feet. Drunk, bemused, happy and utterly fearless. The previous evening he had forgotten to mention to the sergeant of the guard that Wilks had left a Christ-

mas gift for him. After giving the matter very little thought, Hawthorne decided to hide the bottle of whisky and use it for his interview with Captain Black on the following day. He had reasoned it out that this time he was really in trouble. Chucking a desk at an officer, even a NAAFI officer, was pretty sure to be frowned on. So he may as well go the whole hog and tell Black a few home truths while he was about it, and to do that he would need a few stiff whiskies to loosen his tongue.

Every time he thought about Captain Black's remark he went hot and cold. Too often he had been belittled in his lifetime and treated as if he were an imbecile, and he was determined that Captain Black was not going to get away with it, but, unfortunately, in getting himself ready for the interview, he had drunk too much whisky too quickly, and the result was that the only sounds he could make were almost meaningless uncouth noises. His sensitive soul shuddered as he listened to the noises coming from his mouth but he was still determined to have a go.

"Sergeant-major," said Captain Black. "This man's drunk." He followed this obvious remark with an incredulous glance towards RSM Hart.

"Know . . . know . . . know, don' you—know don' you," drooled Hawthorne as he swayed gently in front of Captain Black. Words, he inwardly groaned. Brain's a bit gassed up, I know, but it's still sort of functioning. Not stuttering, but my bloody tongue's gone on strike. My luck's always out. I'd better write it and send it to one of the generals, but who? Now Wavell's gone, Rommel's supposed to be the only good one left over here. Send it to him with a ps If you capture the above-mentioned bastard, shoot him. It's amazing, Hawthorne thought. I'm gassed up, speechlessly drunk, but my dear old brain is still in top gear and working near miracles. If I could only get my brain and vocal cords to come to a gentleman's agreement, there would be no stopping me. His pleasant thoughts were rudely interrupted as RSM Hart pushed him and sent him staggering a few drunken steps across the room, then a heavy hand descended on the back of his neck and jerked him to attention facing Captain Black again.

RSM Hart's voice barked in his ear. "Couldn't believe it myself, sir. Prisoner in charge. Under close arrest. Drunk!"

"Know . . . know . . . know wha' you can do, don' you?" said Hawthorne thickly. "Know, don' you?" Funny, it comes out wrong every time, Hawthorne thought. Fantastic.

RSM Hart shook him violently. "Shut your trap," he barked.

From my brain to my tongue is about a million light years, Hawthorne thought. There's no justice. Can't be. "As-assault," he complained. "Had a goo' sup— goo' sup—" No good, he thought, as his knees bent and RSM Hart pulled hard on him to keep him upright. This just isn't my day.

"Sit him down," said Captain Black. "How any human being can make such a pig of himself . . ." He shook his head in disgust as he watched RSM Hart place a chair under Hawthorne, and bounce him viciously on it a few times. "Now, Hawthorne," he said as he leaned forward, then averted his face as the fumes from Hawthorne's breath got under his nose. "Listen to me. You stink of whisky. Where did you get it? Lift your head when I'm speaking to you."

Hawthorne lifted his head wearily. There were two blurred Captain Blacks staring at him. That's too many, he thought. One's bad enough, but two! Ought to be a law against it.

"Are you listening, Hawthorne? Tell me where you got the whisky and it may help your case. Do you understand? I'm trying to help you."

Hawthorne's head drooped again. Sleep, he thought. I've had it. Better get my head down. What he's going on about? Don't have to stay here. He suddenly lurched to his feet and shouted: "Hap-hap-happy New Year to all my friends . . ."

"Get him out of here," shouted Captain Black. He was catching on quickly and putting iron into his orders.

"Prisoner, about turn. Double, left, right, left, right, left, right. Wait outside," shouted RSM Hart.

Hawthorne about turned, almost fell over and staggered out shouting at the top of his voice: "Not you two. Not you. Not you two bastards."

Captain Black looked grim. "Hawthorne must be taught a lesson, sergeant-major."

"He will be," said RSM Hart. "Are you acquainted with Sergeant Matthews, sir?"

"Yes, I know him. Why?"

"Suggest you let me have him. He did seven years as a Regular, sir. Knows the ropes. He can give me a hand to discipline this . . ." Hart checked himself. "The men, sir."

"If you think he will be useful to you, sergeant-major."

"He will, sir," said RSM Hart, who could smell out a sadist a mile away.

RSM Hart was determined to get the men into church as often as possible just to make them suffer. He stood in the centre of the parade ground with Captain Black at his side. "Fall out, the C of Es," he shouted. "C of Es fall out." Half the men slouched out of line and Hart pointed his cane. "Double over there." The men moved into a shambling trot and Hart watching them, felt nauseated. "Halt," he snarled. "Get into line." He had to turn his back on them. Watching the men bumping into each other and tripping over their feet as they tried to get into line was more than he could stomach. I'll have them, he promised himself. I'll have them smartened up and looking like soldiers if it's the last thing I ever do. They don't know what they're in for yet. Don't know what's coming to them. RSM Hart pointed his cane. "Over here, the RCs." After a good pause half a dozen men shambled away. As far as Hart was concerned, Catholics were all Micks and he hated the Micks. The men shuffled their feet and bumped into each other, then finally got into line. Hart stared at the remaining men, then after a good pause he pointed his cane. "The rest of you ardent churchgoers, over there." The men shuffled miserably away, but Jackson and Cameron did not move. Hart stared at them. So we've got a couple of music hall comics here, have we? I'll bloody soon move them, he thought, as he marched away

briskly, then halted and faced Cameron. "What's your name, sergeant?"

"Cameron, sir."

"Are you supposed to be a senior NCO? Funny kind of example to set. Now, what's your bloody religion?"

"I'm an agnostic, sir."

"Are you now? A bloody agnostic, are you? Rare birds they are in the British Army." He turned to Jackson. "What's your name, corporal?"

"Jackson, sir."

"Religion?"

"I'm a Communist."

RSM Hart's face screwed up in pain.

Captain Black, fast losing patience, shouted across the parade ground, "Sergeant-major, what the devil's going on."

RSM Hart, in a hell of a temper, turned a brick-red face towards Captain Black and shouted back: "These bleedin' men, sir, don't believe in bleedin' Jesus Christ. One's a bleedin' agnostic and the other's a bolshie."

Captain Black marched over and stared at Jackson and Cameron. An agnostic was bad enough but a self-confessed Communist . . . "Put them in with the C of Es," he snapped.

"Double away you two, over there," said Hart as he pointed his cane towards the dejected group of C of Es. Jackson and Cameron did not move. "Gave you an order," said Hart pushing his face close to Cameron's. "Double away."

"I've a right to me convictions, sir," said Cameron stubbornly, "and nobody's going to march me into church."

"Or me, sir," said Jackson. "The party would disown me if they heard about it."

Hart turned an enquiring eye on Captain Black and waited for him to either express an opinion or give a direct order, but judging by his expression, he was somewhat nonplussed by the sudden turn of events and was counting on RSM Hart's military experience to solve the problem. Captain Black's eyes wavered and he

noisily cleared his throat. "Er, it would be wrong to compel non-believers to attend church, wouldn't it, Mister Hart?"

"That's right, sir," agreed Hart. "Every man's got a right to his convictions, sir. If they're genuine," he added with a sidelong glance at Cameron.

"Lack of convictions, I would say, in this case," said Captain Black as he straightened his thin shoulders. "Have you taken their names?"

"I have, sir," said RSM Hart grimly.

"Remember them. Remember them well. Totally unfit to wear King's uniform." Captain Black turned on his heels and marched away.

Sergeant Cameron stood five feet seven inches in his stocking feet and weighed ten and a half stones and God help anyone who tried to take advantage of his size or, seemingly, gentle nature. A careful observer, noting his flattened nose and bony forehead would be well advised to have second thoughts before taking on the stockily built Cameron who could move with incredible speed, punch hard with both hands and use his forehead as a pay-off punch when necessary. Cameron was not by nature a violent man, but he was tough and fearless and had been brought up in a hard school. He had ended a promising career as a footballer by breaking training once too often, and had ended an even more promising career as a boxer by one day stating: "The bloody thumping is no worth the pennies. I'm no going to end up punch drunk."

Jackson and Cameron were good friends and a more unlikely couple it was hard to imagine. Jackson admired Cameron's toughness and integrity. He knew that he could rely on Jock in any emergency and Cameron liked Jackson, because he was an amusing companion, generous, easy going, and completely crazy.

Cameron stared at the Arab boy who was about twelve years

old and wore a permanent sweet innocent smile on his lips. "Will you say it in English, you wee woggie?"

The Arab boy laughed and shook his head. "No speak English." Then he laughed again and went through the motions of getting speedily and happily drunk, then stopped staggering about like a clown and looked up at Cameron with his beseeching eyes and ever-smiling lips.

"If he's trying to flog us zibzib," said Cameron to Jackson, "he can bloody keep it."

The Arab boy shook his head violently. "No zibzib, whisky."

"Where the hell would they get whisky?" enquired Cameron.

"They know where to find it," said Jackson, with a grin. "All they have to do is get a job on the docks."

"Aye," agreed Cameron. "These woggies are top of the first division table when it comes to a fiddle. I could do with a dram or two. How about you, Johnnie?"

Jackson nodded, and the ever-smiling Arab boy beckoned to them and walked away. They watched him and both burst out laughing. The boy wore a German army jacket, much too large for him, and his Italian army boots were so big that they threatened to send him sprawling on his face at any moment. Still laughing, they followed the Arab boy out of the market place and finally stopped in a dingy narrow street. The boy pointed to a café. Jackson glanced at a long line of women who were queuing outside a bakery, and Cameron seemed to read his thoughts. "Let's take a look at them." They walked down the queue and inspected the women, then halted at the end of the queue and Cameron lit a cigarette and judging by his expression he was bitterly disappointed. "Wonder where all the young birds have gone," said Jackson.

"They must be hiding them in dark cellars or some place, Johnnie."

"Know what I think," said Jackson. "The Ities must have taken them with them when they retreated."

Cameron looked at the old women. "The bastards," he said with feeling.

The Arab boy urged them towards the café, and they were about to enter it when the door opened with a crash and two New Zealand soldiers staggered out. Jackson felt a cold shiver run down his spine. The soldiers didn't look like men. They looked as if they would be more at home living up a tree. They didn't walk, they shambled with their arms dangling at their sides. They moved like apes with dead eyes and made brutish noises with their mouths. The first soldier drew back his lips and exposed his teeth as he snarled and glared insanely about him. The second soldier growled, then rushed at the women, and like a mad ape he clawed at them and bit them and the women screamed and fled in all directions with the two drink-crazed soldiers pursuing them. Jackson felt sick. He turned to where the Arab boy had been standing but he was no longer there. Only his boots stood on the narrow pavement. The boy was running barefooted up the street.

"Oh, Christ," said Jackson out loud, as he watched one of the soldiers tearing the clothes off an old woman. "Oh, Jesus Christ," he repeated as the old woman fell on her knees screaming in terror. A flattened, much sucked at, wizened old breast flapped out of her clothes. She fell on her face, still screaming, and the soldier kicked her then ran up the street in pursuit of another old woman. I'll be sick any minute now, thought Jackson, as he held on to a wall. A sight like that could put you right off crumpet for all time, the poor old cow.

Two men ran out of a house and pulled the screaming women inside.

"Let's go for that drink," said Cameron.

"Are you crazy?" shouted Jackson. "Are you out of your bloody mind?"

"I've all my chairs," said Cameron.

"That Arab kid," shouted Jackson. "That cherub faced little bastard was taking us in there."

"Come on," said Cameron impatiently, as he headed towards the café.

"You're crazy, you thick-nutted Scottish nit," shouted Jackson after him.

Cameron walked into the café and Jackson's stomach stopped heaving, so he followed him in and closed the door then instantly regretted it. The café stank. The table tops were dirty and encrusted with old spilt drink stains. Drunken flies crawled across the table and dead flies lay on the dirty floor. Let me out of here, thought Jackson. Just let me out. An Arab aged about thirty pushed aside a bead curtain and stood behind the bar. He was tall and badly needed a shave. He smiled unpleasantly, and squinted at Cameron.

"Can we get a drink here?" enquired Cameron politely.

The Arab placed a bottle and two glasses on the counter. "Whisky." Again the unpleasant smile as he poured the drinks.

It looks like the real stuff, thought Cameron as he watched the Arab pour the drinks. Even the colour looks right, but that bloody whisky's never seen the green hills of Scotland or heard the pipes playing. "I'm a Scot," he said to the Arab, "and the whisky you've just poured is a bonnie colour." The Arab smiled unpleasantly again but clearly did not understand. "It's the only tippie that doesna make me suffer the next day," smiled Cameron. "You'd better have one yourself."

The Arab still looked blank so Cameron tapped him on the chest lightly with his forefinger. "You—drink—yes?" The Arab understood and smiled and shook his head. "Me Moslem. No drink." As he pushed the drinks across the bar, Cameron punched him in the face and as the Arab reeled back, Cameron grabbed him by his jacket and pulled him back to the bar, and holding him firmly with both hands, he repeatedly nodded the Arab in the face with his forehead. The Arab screamed as his nose was flattened and broken, and the skin and flesh about his eyes bruised, puffed up, then gashed open and the Arab's blood dripped on to the bar. Finally, Cameron let him go and the Arab fell on to the floor behind the bar, moaning horribly.

"Lock the door," said Cameron, and without thinking, Jackson bolted the door then turned and watched Cameron walk behind the bar then bend down and pull the groaning Arab by his skinny legs into the centre of the room. Then, standing with his hands in

his pockets, he looked at the Arab critically and said: "I've made a bloody mess of him but I was careful not to nod him in the mouth."

Jackson crossed the room and stared at the Arab lying on his back. The bruised and swollen flesh had almost closed his eyes. "Kneel over his chest," said Cameron, "and put your knees on his arms." Jackson turned his back on the Arab and stared at Cameron. "And keep his big ugly trap open, Johnnie. It's high time this bloody Moslem gave up being teetotal."

Cameron demonstrated for Jackson's benefit how to keep the Arab's mouth open by squeezing hard on the man's cheeks with his hand. Jackson knelt over the Arab and placed his knees firmly on the man's outstretched arms and got the full impact of stale sweat, body dirt and unwashed clothes up his nostrils. In a rage, he jumped his knees on the Arab's thin spindly arms and the man started meaning again, then Jackson forced his mouth open and Cameron poured the first drink down the man's throat and then quickly poured the second drink into the man's open mouth, but he resisted and, turning his head sideways, he managed to spit most of the drink out and then he howled miserably and horribly, so Cameron picked up a bottle and rammed it into his mouth and watched the bottle with interest as it slowly emptied. Then he threw the empty bottle away and nodded his head as if well satisfied, and Jackson stood up and watched the Arab slowly crawl across the floor to a corner of the room. Then, moving his arms as he tried to get his fingers into his mouth, he rolled on to his back and lay kicking feebly, and it was clear that his co-ordination was quickly deserting him. His arms and legs moved feebly like a helpless baby's. He looks like a dirty bloody great beetle, thought Jackson, who's been turned on his back and can't right himself. The arms and legs stopped moving and Jackson looked enquiringly at Cameron.

"He'll die right enough," said Cameron. "He's got the best part of a bottle of jungle juice inside him, but I'm hoping he'll go crazy first, then blind."

Jackson stared at the Arab then shivered. Christ, I hadn't counted on that, he thought, as in panic he moved towards the door.

"Sit down, Johnnie," said Cameron.

Jackson stood near the door. The Arab was kicking his arms and legs again like a helpless baby, but more vigorously now and making horrible noises.

"You saw those two poor bloody Kiwis, Johnnie, you saw how crazy they were."

"You're crazy," shouted Jackson. "You're out of your bloody mind."

"Those two boys will soon be blind," said Cameron, "and then they'll drop dead and how many more do you think this bastard's seen off?"

Jackson stared at the Arab. Jock's right, of course, he thought. It's only justice, but look at him lying there waving his bloody arms and legs, and I helped. I'm responsible. The bastard deserves to die, but I wish I hadn't been involved. You can't make snap decisions about life and death like that. All we had to do was hand him over to the Red Caps and let them deal with him.

"Sit down," said Cameron. "The next few minutes should be interesting."

Jackson sat at a table near the door and watched the Arab, and had to keep reminding himself that he was watching a dying man. It somehow didn't seem possible. Ten minutes ago this man was alive and healthy, and now . . . I'm a murderer, thought Jackson, and broke out into a cold sweat. I must be crazy sitting here watching him die. Any one could find us here—the police. But Jackson sat on and watched the Arab as he tried to get to his feet. Several times he got on to one knee and then toppled over and all the time he was making animal noises in the back of his throat, and eventually he managed to hoist himself up by holding on to a table, then he staggered around the room, blindly crashing into tables and chairs.

"He's got his second wind," said Cameron. "You can open the door now, Johnnie, he looks as if he could use some fresh air."

Jackson violently opened the door, only too eager to see the last of the dying Arab, and Cameron pushed him towards the door and they watched him as he stumbled up the street with his arms dangling by his side, snarling at people who quickly got out of his way.

3

The words of Ol' Man River floated through Captain Black's brain. Body all aching and racked with pain... Body all aching and racked with pain... Body all aching and racked with pain... on and on like a demented gramophone record. Dammit, I've got to switch it off, he thought desperately. It's sending me mad. Think constructively about that bloody awful medical officer. He concentrated all his thoughts on the MO, a cheerful giant of a man with a very red face, due to a painful skin disease. He doesn't give a damn, Captain Black thought. He's living proof that doctors know damn all. I drag myself round to see him and the bloody fool cheerfully assures me that there are no bones broken. Even draws a diagram of a rib cage and pelvis bones. If my bones aren't broken then why the hell am I suffering such absolute, almost impossible to bear, agony.

Hawthorne's mad. Stark raving mad. Ought to be in a strait-jacket. A court martial and the glasshouse for him and the sergeant of the guard. Bribery. How did that word suddenly come to me, he wondered. Bribe the MO with a bottle of Scotch. He was appalled. I can't... I mean... for God's sake... Only way I'll get an honest opinion out of him isn't it? he reasoned. He's a

drunk. Anyone can see that. A real boozier's face. I'll give it to him straight. Look here, doc. I want the truth. I can take it, you know, and don't think you'll get me into hospital, because you won't, but I don't want to overdo things and knock myself up. There's no one to take my place. Ah, that's it. No one to take my place. Everything will come to a standstill unless I carry on. So under these extreme circumstances I've no option but to bribe that drunken bastard. All I want is my damned ribs strapped up so that I can carry on. He reached out tenderly for his stick and gasped as the pain hit him. Christ. A few bruises. The man's a lunatic. All my ribs are broken. Pelvis bone too, I shouldn't wonder. Awful pain in the crutch. Maybe he'll give me a shot to ease the pain. Get a bottle of whisky from the bulk issue store. Having to bribe a doctor to get an honest opinion. Wonder where Hawthorne got his whisky from. He'd better find his tongue. I'll get the truth out of him, or Hart will.

He slowly hobbled to the door, supporting himself on his stick. Must show a good face. Mustn't let the chaps think I'm a hospital case or I'll have trouble on my hands. He slowly closed the door behind him, then whistled softly under his breath as he stepped out into the bright sunshine. Cold, he thought, but a lovely day. You don't get winter days like this in England. He walked slowly and carefully towards the bulk issue store.

Sergeant Cameron had nothing to do. He was in transit awaiting a posting, but no one seemed to be aware of this, possibly because he always carried several pieces of paper with him and stepped out briskly as though he were on some pretty important business. Seeing Captain Black hobbling towards him, he straightened his back and threw up a very smart salute. Without thinking Captain Black returned the salute and just managed to restrain himself from screaming aloud in agony. Cameron's sharp eyes noticed this and, smiling to himself, he thought, must tip the lads off to chuck him a salute every time they see him.

Captain Black slowly turned and glared at Cameron's retreating back, then he hobbled on. Seeing RSM Hart he waved his stick and called out: "Sergeant-major." Hart called back, "Sir," at the top of his lungs and marched towards Captain Black who was now frantically searching his mind for an original opening remark. He had once read: "To hold an audience's attention one must start a conversation, or speech, with a devastating or original sentence." At the time he had thought that this made a great deal of sense. Of course, it wasn't always easy to dream up a devastating or original sentence, but he was convinced in his own mind that he usually succeeded. As RSM Hart slammed to attention, Captain Black cleared his throat and said: "Sergeant-major. We must sort out the chaff from the wheat."

"Yes, sir," Hart readily agreed.

"There's Private Hawthorne," Captain Black frowned and dug his stick into the muddy ground.

"He's no problem, sir. Assaulting an officer. Serious offence that on its own," RSM Hart switched on a sympathetic smile. "You ought to be taking it easy."

"Too busy. I want Hawthorne to be returned to Cairo to face a court martial, as soon as you can lay on transport."

"Yes, sir. Short of transport at the moment. The fitters seem to be an idle lot, but I'm chasing them."

"Good. Keep after them, Mister Hart. Only way we'll ever get things done." Captain Black waved his stick and shouted at a group of men who were standing near a lorry, smoking. "Are you supposed to be unloading that lorry?"

The corporal in charge called back: "We are, sir."

"Then let me see you put your backs into it."

The men started working again.

RSM Hart smiled. "I'm keeping Hawthorne on his toes, sir."

"Good, sergeant-major. Glad to hear it."

"Parades with the guard, sir, 0600 hours, then PT 0630 hours to 0700 hours, then pack drill 0700 hours to 1200 hours, dinner 1200 hours to 1400 hours, but I keep him busy cleaning his kit and other interesting tasks."

"Splendid," said Captain Black impatiently. "Jolly good." He was delighted to hear that Hawthorne was being made to suffer but couldn't be bothered with all the gory details.

"1400 hours," droned on RSM Hart, "digging holes and filling them in again, then tea break, then 1730 hours to 1800 hours doubling with full pack, 1800 hours parades with the guard, then . . ."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Captain Black. "Jolly good. Glad you're keeping him busy."

"Can see a difference in him already," beamed Hart. "Soon be bursting fit, sir."

Hawthorne fell on his knees and stared in disbelief at Sergeant Matthews. How much does this crazy sadistic bastard think I can take, he wondered.

"On your feet," shouted Sergeant Matthews.

"I'm knack-knack-knackered," shouted back Hawthorne.

"Up!" bellowed Sergeant Matthews. "On your bloody feet. Move."

Hawthorne wearily climbed to his feet, bounced his pack higher on to his back, lifted his rifle on to his shoulder and doubled away on trembling knees.

Sergeant Matthews smiled and gave the order: "About turn!"

"Another week or two, sir," beamed RSM Hart, "and Hawthorne will look like a guardsman."

"Good," said Captain Black. "Now what about Sergeant Cameron?"

"He's only got to make one false move, sir, and don't forget that bolshie, Jackson."

"We won't, sergeant-major."

"Give 'em all enough rope, sir, and they'll hang themselves."

Captain Black nodded his head in agreement. "And there's Goldstein. I suggest that when we get transport for Hawthorne that we send the rest of them packing too."

"To Cairo, you mean, sir?" said Hart, looking at Captain Black as if he was raving mad.

"Why not? Men like Cameron, Scott, and Jackson set a bad example to the other ranks."

Hart smiled. "Don't mind my saying so, sir, but I've never set eyes on such undisciplined scum in all my life. These NAAFI wallahs . . ."

"Not all of them," snapped Captain Black. "We've some good chaps. Sergeant Pilgrim for one." He reeled off a dozen other names.

RSM Hart looked suspicious. Everyone that Captain Black had mentioned was queer.

Hawthorne had constant nightmares about his childhood, and his father who had left home when Hawthorne was only three weeks old to post a letter and never returned, played the role of chief villain. He had once seen a photograph of his father, which his mother had quickly snatched from his hand. He was a handsome man with a kindly smile and in Hawthorne's nightmares this handsome, smiling man performed acts of the utmost cruelty. He locked him in dark cupboards, burnt his flesh with a red-hot poker, starved him, and, smiling all the time, sexually assaulted him. With all his heart Hawthorne hated his unknown father. All he knew about him were stories his mother had told him from time to time, but they differed according to her mood . . . your father made a lot of money. He was very rich, you know, and came from a good family. Or—he was a petty officer in the Royal Navy and once came home with a hundred sovereigns and poured them into my lap. Next day he took them all from the vase and I didn't see him for months. He'd gone back to sea. He always had mistresses—vaguely—oh, everywhere. One of them was Lady somebody or other. Another time: You know, of course, that your father was personal secretary to a famous politician. Can't remember his name now, but your father always mixed with the very best people.

When Hawthorne wasn't having nightmares about his father he day-dreamed about meeting him one day and telling him exactly what he thought of him.

Sergeant Matthews slapped the butt of the rifle with his horny hand as Private Hawthorne staggered past him on trembling knees. "Keep it up. Up!" he shouted. The rifle butt hit Hawthorne on the chin and knocked him over and he lay on the ground too dazed to move or even think clearly.

"Up!" shouted Sergeant Matthews. "On your bloody feet."

Hawthorne's brain cleared a little. You bastard, he thought, you nearly took my head off that time. He slowly and wearily climbed to his feet.

"Pick up your rifle!"

As Hawthorne bent down, a red mist suddenly appeared before his eyes and he was almost sure that he could hear the blood boiling in his veins. Here we are, he inwardly groaned, I'm going to go potty again, but he was secretly delighted. He knew that it was the only way that he could possibly get any relief. He picked up the rifle by the barrel, straightened up, and stared insanely at Matthews, then shouted, "Full pack drill . . . on the go all day . . . too beaten up to bloody well sleep at night. How much do you think I can take?" Didn't stutter once, he inwardly gloated, so I'm ready to have a go at him or anybody else. He opened his mouth wide and howled: "Like me to wrap this rifle round your bloody neck?" Marvellous, he thought, bloody marvellous. I ought to go potty more often.

Sergeant Matthews quickly stepped back several paces. "Slope arms," he ordered.

Hawthorne, holding on to the rifle barrel, slowly turned in a circle, then increased his pace until he was twirling like a Dervish dancer, then he let go of the rifle and it flew out of his hands and landed about twenty yards away. Hawthorne staggered around in a circle for a few more moments then abruptly fell over.

"Pick it up," shouted Matthews.

"You pick it up," gasped Hawthorne.

"You're on a charge."

"Get stuffed," howled Hawthorne. "Get stuffed."

"Your last chance."

"Get knotted," howled Hawthorne, who was almost beside himself with joy because he wasn't stuttering.

"Right . . . right." Sergeant Matthews marched up and down in front of the recumbent Hawthorne. "You're on a charge. Got that? On a bloody charge."

"Don't care. Don't bloody care," said Hawthorne, who was delightedly listening to the sound of his own voice.

"On your feet when I'm speaking to you," said Matthews. "Come on now. Up!"

Hawthorne knelt and slipped out of his pack. "Finished," he said. "Don't care what you do."

He slowly got to his feet, stared at Sergeant Matthews, then walked away.

"Come back here," shouted Matthews.

"Finished," shouted back Hawthorne. "I've had my chips. Get stuffed. Get knotted. Dig a hole for yourself and jump in. I'm finished!" He walked on.

Sergeant Matthews picked up Hawthorne's pack then ran to the rifle and picked it up. "You've had your chips all right," he shouted after Hawthorne. "You'll go inside and never come out again."

Hawthorne walked on with his hands in his pockets. "It's all bull shit!" he yelled, "all bull shit!"

Sergeant Matthews trotted after Hawthorne, carrying his rifle and pack. "Never come out," he kept yelling. "Hawthorne, you'll never bloody come out."

"Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!" Hawthorne was joyously listening to the sound of his own voice. "Crab apples. Tarts and tits and titty tarts." Marvellous, he thought. I got my t's as clear as a bell. "McGinty's goat for Prime Minister," he shouted and yelled with laughter. The sound of his own voice saying the words

clearly without any hesitation or stammer was more beautiful to his ears than any other sound in the world.

Cameron stared at Jackson's stock books with increasing interest. Nobody could make head or tail of these books, he thought. Not even Einstein. Only the first three pages made any kind of sense. The rest were smudged with ink stains and none of the columns of figures were added up correctly. Total confusion reigned supreme for page after page. These books are a bloody auditor's nightmare, thought Cameron. "How come you got the first three pages right, Johnnie?" he enquired mildly.

"Major Winters in Cairo laid out the first page as a guide and Black did the next two pages," said Johnnie.

"And then you took over, eh, Johnnie?"

"Yes, anything wrong?"

Cameron handed the books back to Jackson and shook his head in wonderment. "I wouldn't know where to start explaining it to you."

"I told Winters I wasn't too hot at figures," said Jackson, "but he wouldn't listen to me."

"Wouldn't he?" said Cameron. "Well, maybe he should have."

"Some people you can't tell anything, Jock."

"Aye, that's true," agreed Cameron.

"I didn't want the bloody job. I didn't want to be in charge of a mobile canteen anyway."

"Why not? It's a cushy number."

"I couldn't see how I could make a profit, Jock."

Cameron nodded his head. "Aye, that makes sense. Have you had second thoughts about it?"

"Yes," said Jackson. "I've not done too badly. So far I've made about three hundred quid."

"How did you manage that?"

"I don't know," confessed Jackson, "but I've got the money, look." He pulled out a bulging wallet and showed it to Cameron.

"Not bad." Cameron whistled tunelessly under his breath. "I could use a few quid."

"Help yourself," said Jackson, and nodded to the safe.

Cameron looked amazed. "You mean just help myself?"

"Of course," said Jackson generously.

I always knew old Johnnie had a hole in his head, thought Cameron, but I shouldn't take advantage of his simplicity. "How much money have you in the little black box?" he asked cautiously.

"No idea. I haven't counted it," said Jackson carelessly as he threw the safe key to Cameron.

Not counted it, marvelled Cameron to himself, as he opened the safe and took out the money and handled it fondly as he made a rough calculation in his head. "There's a few hundred quid here, four . . . no, about five hundred quid."

"Must be," agreed Jackson.

"Would fifty be missed?" Cameron winced and shut his eyes as he anticipated a violent blast from Jackson. I should have asked for twenty he thought. Well, I can always drop down to that.

"Fifty?" said Jackson. "The state the stock books are in, Jock, I can't see that fifty quid would be missed."

I'll never get another chance like this again, thought Cameron. It's not every day that you meet a fella who's convinced he's a millionaire's bastard. I shouldn't be greedy, but what's a fella to do, turn his back on golden opportunities? "These notes, Johnnie," he said with a faint tremble in his voice. "These big 'uns with the lurid pictures, are they wog ten pound notes, now?"

"Yes," said Jackson. "I sold a truck load of stuff to a Polish Div who were heading towards the front and they paid me in tenners."

"Aye, and you made a profit out of the transaction." Cameron thought that at last he had hit on the secret of Jackson's success.

"No," said Jackson. "Since they couldn't speak very good English I tried to fiddle them, of course, but the bastards caught on."

"Then how the hell have you made a profit?" enquired Cameron.

"Easy," said Jackson. "I just help myself to anything I want from the safe."

Cameron looked perplexed. "Johnnie," he said gently, "you canna do that."

"I've done it."

"You won't get away with it, Johnnie."

Jackson smiled. "Would you put a man in charge of a mobile canteen who can hardly count up to five on his fingers?"

Cameron stared thoughtfully at Jackson. "Go on," he said. "Let's hear some more."

"A man who frequently protested in front of witnesses that he's no good at figures."

"Witnesses, eh?" murmured Cameron.

"Witnesses," Jackson agreed.

"So, you're no good at figures, Johnnie?"

"Bloody useless," said Jackson cheerfully.

Cameron nodded his head slowly. "Under the circumstances I canna see how another hundred quid will be missed. These ten pound notes. I've always wanted to own a few of them." He opened his wallet and slipped a hundred pounds into it, then locked the safe and threw the key to Jackson.

Hawthorne awakened from another dream about his father, and lay sweating and trembling. He lit a cigarette and sat up in bed. Sergeant Wilks had kindly looked in and slipped him a packet of twenty Players. I'd like to meet up with my dear old dad. How many thousand times have I thought that, he wondered. Well, he owes me something, doesn't he? All those miserable years. He's responsible for my stutter. That rotten home school mother had to shove me into when I was six. Home school! More like a mad house and I was only six. How was I to know that mum was broke and couldn't look after me. I thought she didn't want me. What was a kid of six to think? That little Taffy kid who started thumping me. Then all the others. I couldn't make it out. Couldn't understand why. Night after night crying myself to sleep then one of the little bastards would come over and start thumping me, and their filthy little minds. I didn't know what they were talking about. I'll never forget my dear old school. The fortnight's holiday camp was the only good thing about it. We travelled in buses and

sang. How did the song go? Something . . . something . . . something? We know all our manners. We spend all our tanners. We are respected wherever we go and we don't mind living in our dear old home. All the windows open wide . . .

They were, too. Chilblains. Remember a fight I had. Kept punching until the chilblains broke and my knuckle bones showed through. Crying all the time but still punching, then I passed out. I was only nine and I waited until my hands healed then I nailed the little bastard. The Taffy kid. My original tormentor. Only nine years old and I had caught on that I was living in a jungle and one by one I nailed all the little bastards who had given me hell. I was no longer the soft little kid who cried for his mum. I was a nine year old bloody little monster. But I was still different. I had graduated from the softest to the toughest little nut in the school. I had to prove to myself and prove to them that I wasn't just a stuttering idiot. How I hated all kids. Father, you bastard. How I'd love to meet up with you. But you would be an old man now. An old man. Oh, for God's sake, stop moaning. Better get some sleep. Tomorrow, another round with Matthews. Let him shout. I'm doing no more. Let Black shout, and Hart. I'm doing no more. Hawthorne lay back, smiling faintly to himself. Glasshouse next stop and they'll get no joy out of me either. Funny I never go looking for trouble, yet I'm always in it.

"Hawthorne, put that cigarette out," said the sergeant of the guard.

Hawthorne turned his head and smiled at the sergeant and carried on smoking.

"I told you to put that fag out," the sergeant shouted.

Hawthorne drew hard on his cigarette, slowly got out of bed and walked over the sergeant and blew a cloud of smoke into his face then walked back to his bed.

"Hawthorne," the sergeant shouted. "You'd better not give me any trouble."

"T-t-t-t-trouble." Hawthorne started laughing and couldn't stop. Trouble, he thought. I know more about trouble than anybody. It haunts me. Follows me everywhere. Lives with me and

sleeps with me, and when I wake up its still there. Trouble. If I wasn't in trouble I'd think it was my birthday. I'm not staying in this stinking hole listening to that moron shouting at me. He got out of bed and began to dress.

"Now what the hell do you think you're doing?" shouted the sergeant.

"G-g-g-going f-f-for a w-w-walk."

"You crazy bastard. Guard, get him."

The sleeping guard, annoyed at being awakened, crawled out of bed and threw themselves on Hawthorne, punching and kicking him, until he stopped resisting, then, uttering dire threats, they returned to their beds.

Hawthorne wiped his arm across his bloody face and smiled. Caused a bit of excitement, anyway, he thought. And I put one on that bloody sergeant. I've been wanting to do that for a long time. He lay back and lit another cigarette.

"Hawthorne," shouted the sergeant. "I've told you, no smoking."

"Aw, belt up," grumbled the corporal of the guard. "Let the poor sod have a smoke."

"You're on report tomorrow," shouted the sergeant. "You hear me, Hawthorne. You're on report."

Hawthorne smiled. I'm doing as well here as I did at my dear old school, he thought. When they're asleep maybe I'll set fire to somebody's bed. This thought pleased him very much and he started laughing.

"He's bonkers," shouted the sergeant. "Stark raving bonkers."

Hawthorne was shaking with laughter. His bed, he was thinking. That loud-mouthed, moronic, easy to hate, not fit to live, stinking sergeant. He's in for a shock when he suddenly wakes up. Bet he thinks he's in hell. Still laughing he suddenly regretted that he wasn't fifteen stone and as strong as an ox. Being only ten stone and skinny was a hell of a disadvantage.

Captain Black, forgetting his aches and pains, sprang to his

feet and shouted, "Jackson, do you think I'm a bloody fool? You won't get away with this."

Jackson looked puzzled. "I don't understand you, sir."

"Not even a raving bloody idiot could make such a . . . such a . . ." In a rage Captain Black picked up the books, glared at Jackson, then threw the books on the desk.

"I told Major Winters that I wasn't good at figures, sir."

"I showed you, me!" shouted Captain Black. "I spent the best part of two afternoons going over the books with you."

"And I did my best to follow you, sir." Jackson looked puzzled. "Funny thing. I can't seem to make figures work for me, sir."

"Can't you?" said Captain Black as he slowly sat down and placed his elbows on the desk. "You're telling me you're a bloody fool, are you, Jackson?"

"No, sir. I'm telling you that figures are a bit of a mystery to me. I can't seem to make them work."

"Can't you?" said Captain Black trying his best to control the tremble in his voice. "By God, I bet these figures work for you. You're a crook!"

"I'm trying to keep my temper, sir," said Jackson standing on his dignity. "I don't care for accusations like that. Permission to send for a witness and have you repeat that remark."

"A crook," said Captain Black. "A cheap, dirty crook and here's the proof." He snatched up the books and held them aloft. "All the proof I need."

"I wish I could follow you, sir," said Jackson. "Are you trying to tell me that those books prove that I'm a crook?"

"Yes," shouted Captain Black.

"You mean the stock doesn't tally, or something?" said Jackson.

"The understatement of the year," said Captain Black forcing himself to remain calm.

"You mean the money I've paid in, sir," said Jackson looking even more puzzled, "is less than the stock I received. Is that it?"

Captain Black gripped the desk. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"How much, sir?"

"You're a hundred and forty-three pounds short," said Captain Black, making a wild guess.

"I thought you said the books didn't make any kind of sense to you, sir."

Captain Black had an almost irresistible urge to punch Jackson on the nose, but just in time he controlled himself and dropped the books on to the desk.

"Wish I was better at figures, sir," said Jackson. "I can see now that it's a bit of a handicap, but as you and Major Winters know . . ."

"You won't get away with it, Jackson. Now, get out."

"Yes, sir. But that's no way to speak to an NCO." Jackson threw up a salute and marched to the door.

"Corporal Jackson."

"Sir."

"I'm pushing this as hard as I can. I'll make it a court-martial job if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Anyone overhearing you, sir, would think you had it in for me."

"Get out!" shouted Captain Black.

Corporal Lynch, lying comfortably on his bed, wished that Cameron and Jackson would shut up. He had switched on his favourite daydream where he had fearlessly challenged Joe Louis for his heavyweight title, but the voices had finally distracted him. But he had tried again. He was now running into the Olympic stadium and listening to the crowd roaring him on, and there was only one man ahead of him. The fantastic Finn. The all-time greatest marathon runner the world had ever known, but Lynch was catching him up, fast. England needed the gold medal and he was going to make damn sure that he won it for his dear old country, while, as usual, were not doing too well. Legs felt like rubber. 120 degrees in the shade, and no shade, of course. Still . . . Oh, hell. It was no good. Why can't the two of them shut up?

Cameron was saying: "Aye, I was outside the office at the time and heard every word. That's no way for an officer to speak to an NCO."

Bloody liar, thought Terry Lynch as he stubbed out his cigarette by the side of the bed. He was in his flea pit, scratching himself. He turned and stared at Cameron. "Watch out or you'll find yourself right in it as well, Jock."

"Listen," said Cameron. "If I'm called on to give evidence for this poor fellow, how the hell can that land me in it? It's well known he's got a flawless character." He sat up in bed, lit a cigarette and glanced at Jackson. "You've never been found guilty of gun-running, opium smuggling, pimping or stealing coppers from blind beggars, have you Johnnie?"

"No," said Jackson.

"And NAAFI have got nothing on you?"

"No, Jock. I've always done my duty to the best of my ability," said Jackson who was busy rehearsing the right answers, just in case he had to face a court martial.

"That's true enough, Johnnie, and it's no' your fault that you're a half wit when it comes to numbers."

"Well, we've all got our weaknesses," said Jackson.

"True enough," said Cameron, stretching out on his bed again. "No man's perfect."

"Stop sweating," said Lynch. "Don't suppose anything will come of it. Black's all shout and, anyway, we'll be moving out of here soon and heading for Tripoli."

"Tripoli, eh?" said Cameron.

"Tripoli and the end of the campaign," grinned Jackson. "Isn't that marvellous, Jock?"

"Aye, I canna wait to march into Tripoli," smiled Cameron. "Can you see it, Johnnie? All the wogs on the pavements cheering us."

"I can see it," said Jackson. "All those dear old wogs pelting us with ashes of roses."

"Shut up you two," said Lynch. "Tripoli's supposed to be a smashing town. Nearly as good as Alex."

"They're all smashing towns," said Jackson. "Aren't they, Jock? They're all smashing towns."

"Benghazi's a smashing town," said Cameron, "so I was told."

"Give over, you two," said Lynch. "Tripoli's smashing, and all the Itie girls are there."

"Who says?" enquired Jackson.

"Well, I heard it."

"From who?"

"One of the boys."

"Where did he hear it?"

"Oh, shut up," said Lynch. "You don't believe anything, do you?"

"Tripoli is the next dump we'll find something to moan about," said Jackson. "If we ever get there."

"Think we'll make Tripoli, Johnnie?" enquired Cameron.

"Have to beat our way through the German army first, Jock."

"Good soldiers, I'll give you that," said Lynch. "But this time we're going to lick them."

"Who is?" enquired Jackson.

"We are."

"You mean us?"

"Yeah, us. Who else? Of course I mean us," said Lynch.

"You mean you and me and Jock here?"

"I mean us," shouted Lynch. "The British. Who the hell else would I mean?"

"Then you don't mean us," said Jackson. "You don't mean you and me and Jock."

"I mean us," shouted Lynch. "Our blokes, the British."

"And the Indians?" said Jackson.

"And the bloody Indians," agreed Lynch.

"And the Poles?"

"What bloody Poles?" shouted Lynch. "Now what are you talking about?"

"The Polish Div. It's over here."

"OK, and the Poles and the Aussies and the Kiwis and the Springboks. Our lot. Us. That's who I'm talking about."

"So long as you don't mean us," said Jackson. "You can use up all the rest, but so long as you don't mean us."

"That's true," said Cameron. "They can't put NAAFI in. We're England's last hope."

"Who's talking about NAAFI?" shouted Lynch. "You two, you're a couple of bolshies."

Jackson and Cameron laughed.

Jackson joined the end of the queue, glanced about him, yawned then lit a cigarette and stuck his hands in his pockets and waited. Queueing had become an important part of his life, he queued for the latrines, his meals, post, work detail, pay, leave passes and now reluctantly accepted it as good a time waster as any other. He gazed at a pair of large ears in front of him, then switched his attention to the short-cropped red hair showing beneath the cap, then he gazed at a large broken nose on his left, then at a set of yellow teeth on his right. A low buzzing sound came from behind the yellow teeth and Jackson supposed that the owner of the teeth was humming to himself, but try as hard as he could, he couldn't make out the tune, so he squinted up at the sun, shuffled his feet, poked his head out of line to glance down the queue, then to help kill the waiting time, he switched on his favourite day-dream. The queue would move any moment now and he would find himself on a boat heading for England. He enjoyed this impossible daydream for a few moments then his mind wandered and he found himself speculating on the purpose of this particular queue and quickly decided that at long last someone had decided to put on a cinema show for the troops. The soldier in front turned and looked at Jackson.

"Doesn't seem to be moving, Ginger," said Jackson.

"Be here for some time," said Ginger.

"This the first or second house?" enquired Jackson.

"Didn't know there was a second house, mate."

"Must be," yawned Jackson.

"Why must it be, eh?"

"It stands to reason."

"Does it? Why does it then?"

"If there's a first house then there must be a second house."

"He's bonkers," said Ginger to his mate who nodded his head in agreement and grinned.

I don't know how some of these even got into the army, thought Jackson as he switched his attention from Ginger to his mate. These two poor bastards haven't even got the brains they were born with. "What's showing?" he enquired pleasantly.

"Eh?" Ginger looked surprised.

"What's on?" said Jackson patiently.

"Eh?" said Ginger turning to his mate. "He wants to know what's on, he does."

"Aye, I heard," said Ginger's mate. "I heard him say it."

"What's on?" sniggered Ginger turning to Jackson. "Nothing I hope, mate."

Sand lappy, thought Jackson, the pair of the poor bastards are well gone. Five year olds wouldn't sit in the same classroom with them. He turned his head hoping to see a man with the light of intelligence in his eyes, but all the faces near him were dull eyed and expressionless. Compared with some of these, thought Jackson, Ginger's a flaming genius. I'd better try him once more and see if I can get through. "Look," he said patiently, "if I've seen it before I don't want to see it again, do I?"

Every soldier within hearing distance laughed and the joke was passed along the queue and the laughter ran down the line and turned the corner.

"If I've seen it before," spluttered Ginger, "I don't want to see it again." Having got the words out, he held on to his mate for support and joined in the howl of laughter that greeted this remark.

Jackson stared about him. "What's the matter with all these lunatics?" he wondered. What did I say that's supposed to be so funny. He tried again. "Is it one of Errol Flynn's?"

Another howl of laughter. "One of Errol Flynn's," gloated Ginger.

"What's the bloody joke?" shouted Jackson.

"This ain't the picture queue, you big dope," laughed Ginger, "this is the bleedin' brothel queue."

"The brothel?" Jackson was stunned. He stepped out of line and looked at the long queue of men that turned the corner about thirty yards ahead. Don't believe it, he thought as he slowly walked along the queue, completely ignoring the laughter and jeers as he made a rough count and turned the corner and continued counting and finally reached the head of the queue that disappeared into an old shabby building. Between five and six hundred, he marvelled. Nearer six hundred than five. You wouldn't believe it. He stared at three Red Caps who were keeping the men in order, the queue moving, and one of the Red Caps called out to him, "Get to the end of the queue, soldier."

"How many girls inside there?" Jackson nodded to the house.

"You line up if you want a bunk up," said the Red Cap. "Round the corner, end of the queue."

"How many girls?" enquired Jackson for the second time.

"Six," said the Red Cap, "and my Gran's a flaming beauty compared to the queen of them."

Jackson walked away. Six, he marvelled. Six broken down old whores and there's about six hundred bloody soldiers. A good six hundred. I must write to my girl about this. She used to say I was too much for her. This should give her some idea of what she could do if only she'd try. He walked on, laughing to himself. He still thought of Madge as his girl but she had given him up. He had been overseas eight months when she had written to him.

Dear John,

I don't know how to tell you honestly, but well, there's somebody else. I met him at a party and he was so nice. He's not as good looking as you but he was so charming and he's in the Free French Air Force. He's an officer, not that that matters to me as you know, but he looked so lonely and I suppose I was feeling lonely too. I'm not trying to make excuses mind, but I'm hoping you'll understand. I could see he was lonely. And

that was what got me, I suppose, and he has beautiful eyes and being over here and not being able to speak the language . . .

At this point Jackson stopped reading and sat down and in a fury scribbled on a piece of paper:

The poor bastard, but don't forget I'm over here and don't speak the fucking language either.

Love, Johnnie.

He placed the note in an uncensored envelope, addressed it and handed it to the post corporal. He knew that it would make Madge sit up. That word!

The first time he had taken her to bed, lying on her and feeling her fingers digging into his flesh, she had moaned: "Darling, darling, all I want you to do is keep on . . ."

"Yes?" he had enquired tenderly.

"All I want you to do is keep on . . . keep on . . ."

"Yes?" he had said again but more sharply this time.

"Keep on . . . keep on . . . keep on . . ."

"Yes!" he had shouted. "Yes! I'll keep on."

"Keep on . . ." she had moaned. "Please . . . please . . . please . . . keep on. . ."

He had ploughed even harder into her and shouted even louder: "Say it, go on, say it. Tell me what you want me to do?"

"Darling, oh darling, keep on . . . oh, please keep on . . . darling, oh, please, please keep on . . ."

"Say it!" he had kept shouting, almost going out of his mind. "I want you to say it. I want to hear you say it. Finish what you were saying."

She had reared violently beneath him and dug her finger nails deeper into his flesh and moaned and moved slower—slower, and Jackson was still shouting at her like a crazy man. "Say it, say it, say it," then she lay breathing heavily, then her body had relaxed and she lay very still with her eyes closed.

But she had not said the word he had wanted to hear, and the

many times afterwards when he had made love to her, she could never bring herself to say the word and it had almost sent him mad. He still wrote to her and for some reason that he could not fathom, she always replied. He found this very strange because he only wrote to her with the intention of upsetting her or shocking her and he always included that word in his letters. Now I must write and tell her about the knocking shop, he thought. He really did hate her. Only a week ago he had received a letter from Madge.

Dear John,

I don't know what I'm doing. Paul is dead. He was shot down over France. I don't know why I'm writing to tell you this because your letters have been so cruel and disgusting, but if it makes you feel better, then I will repeat it. My Paul is dead. My darling Paul is dead. He died fighting. No, I'm not getting at you, but if everyone was like you, the Germans would be over here by now and then what would we all do?

Jackson smiled cynically. As if I don't know what you would do, he thought, and continued reading the letter.

I don't know why you are so cruel to me, and I don't know why I even trouble to answer your rotten letters. You used to be so kind and so nice and so understanding and now you're so horrible and sometimes I can't even bear to think of you, but once we did mean so much to each other and that, I suppose, is why I still write to you. I'm sorry for you. It can't be any fun living in a desert. I'm sorry for you and that's why I still write to you, but at this moment I'm more sorry for myself. I have nightmares where I see Paul's plane bursting into flames before it dives into the ground. I wake up screaming and then I cry. I'm heartbroken. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can only cry. I don't care if you answer this or not. I just had to write to somebody but if you do answer, please try to be kind. If I hurt you I'm sorry, but I'm paying for it now, aren't I? I'm so hurt I ache

and all I want to do is cry all the time. Please write, but if you do, please be nice. I don't know what I'm saying or doing.

Love, Madge.

Jackson read the letter three times and each time he got more angry. The shallow, selfish bitch, he thought savagely. To think I fell in love with that. She's so in love with herself she hasn't any time for anyone else. For a fleeting moment he had a clear picture of her in his mind. She was leaning out of a window looking into the garden and her dress lifted as she bent forward and he saw the backs of her long white legs. Then she turned and smiled. That's all there ever was, groaned Jackson. That, her and me and a bed. That! But she was marvellous at it and she looked marvellous. He picked up a pen and replied to her letter at once.

Dear Madge,

I know how you feel. It must be awful for you. Only wanting to cry and not being able to eat or sleep and waking up screaming and having nightmares. You poor kid. I feel so sorry for you too.

So Paul is dead, is he? You poor darling, how you must miss him. But since he had to die, I'm glad he was shot down over France where he speaks the language. You mustn't cry. You must be brave. He's dead but you're still alive. I know you weren't getting at me when you stressed the point that Paul died fighting. I think you were trying to tell me that Paul wasn't only fighting for France, he was fighting for England and for freedom and for you. Isn't this what you were trying to say? Well, you can be proud of him, can't you? It's chaps like Paul who will see to it that England's a good place for chaps like me to live in when the war's over. I only hope that there are a lot more chaps like Paul. I know you must be missing him. Well, darling, I miss you in just the same way and wish you were here so that I could console you.

All my love, Johnnie.

Jackson laughed and turned round and looked at the queue again then walked on. Be a good six weeks before she gets my reply he thought. Stupid bitch. What did she expect from me? She dumps me for a nit in the Free French Air Force. All those poor bloody lunatics are living on borrowed time, so what did she expect? He hated her so much that it hurt, and he knew that he was still in love with her.

4

A fighter plane took off from the airfield and the rest quickly followed, and soon all the planes were in the sky, but they were not heading towards Tripoli, they were flying in the opposite direction.

On a shouted order the REs pressed hard on the plungers, then quickly ducked behind the sandbags as with a deafening roar the buildings went up in flames.

All the NAAFI men stopped work and looked upwards at the huge cloud of flame and smoke that spread across the sky. Captain Black ran towards the men shouting at the top of his voice: "Keep loading, we've got to get all the stores we can on the trucks. Keep loading and let's get out of here." Captain Black lifted a case and tottered towards a lorry with it. Cameron turned to Jackson with a grin. "What's he in a bloody panic about?"

"He's got every right to be," said Jackson. "Jerry's heading this way so keep loading." He struggled with a heavy case and dropped it on to the waiting lorry, then rushed away for another case.

Cameron, watching Jackson, slowly smiled and shook his head. They're all bloody wind-up artists, he thought, the bloody lot of them. Black, Christ, you can see his flesh trembling from here, and

why isn't he limping any more? And bloody RSM Hart's got a good sweat on too, and I've never seen the lads work like this before. "Johnnie," he said as Jackson staggered past him and threw a case into the back of a lorry, "have you got the wind-up or something?"

Jackson stared at Cameron then pointed. "Way over there," he said, "there's a bloody great grey cloud and it's heading this way. Germans," he continued, raising his voice. "Tanks, armoured cars, a few Panzer Divs, all heading this way, and you ask me have I got the wind-up?" He grabbed a case and in a fury he threw it in the back of a lorry. "Don't ask bloody silly questions," he shouted. "Of course I've got the wind-up." He picked up a larger case and staggered towards the lorry. RSM Hart shouted at Jackson, "You there! Don't want to hear that. Hope you were joking."

"Joking!" shouted Jackson, then gave a hollow laugh. "Joking!"

"Glad to see someone's showing spirit," shouted RSM Hart. "Glad to see it."

"Joking," shouted Jackson. "There's a million of them all heading this way and they're all about nine feet tall."

"He's joking," shouted RSM Hart and managed to force a hearty laugh. "Your backs into it. Put your bloody backs into it, lads."

"Keep loading," shouted Captain Black, who had discovered that he possessed unexpected strength and was throwing cases into the back of a lorry with ease. "Keep loading, chaps."

"Your backs into it," ranted RSM Hart, "your bleedin' backs into it."

The men didn't need telling. They were just as anxious to leave Benghazi as far behind them as RSM Hart was.

An hour later, as the last lorry roared out of the barrack gates, the bulk issue store went up in flames. Jackson closed his eyes and thought, that's something that Jerry won't get his hands on. He'll take the town and jolly good luck to him. He can have the market place and all the rubbish they sell, and the harbour and the sunken ships, and he can have all the flea-bitten wogs. All those empty farm houses from Derna onwards, he thought, wonder what hap-

pened to the Italians who owned them? Evacuated to Italy perhaps. But what did the wogs do with the houses and farmland? The bloody lunatics camped on the farmland and garaged their goats in the houses. Jackson silently laughed to himself. Rommel, he thought, you can have the wogs; I can't make head or tail of them. But you'll never get your hands on all that lovely booze, fags, and grub. About a quarter of a million quids' worth of stuff, and the wogs won't get their hands on it either. He gazed at the dismal buildings as the lorry roared through Benghazi. Goodbye to it all, he thought. If I see it again it'll be too soon. He leaned back and tried to make himself more comfortable and Watson shouted at him: "Get off my bloody legs, Johnnie!"

The men had packed cases of cigarettes, Scotch and gin into the lorry and had lined the entire floor with cardboard cases of tinned beer, but most of the men in their panic had forgotten their kit and only Geordie, who was a bit simple, had remembered his rifle. The men sat on the cases of tinned beer, huddled inside their overcoats, and wrapped blankets around their legs. They knew that they had a long and cold drive ahead of them. As they left Benghazi they cheered and Geordie tore open a case of beer and handed round the tins. "You'd think this was a bloody victory, not a retreat," said Cameron, and the men laughed as they jabbed their jack-knives into the tins and the beer squirted out. "Anybody think to chuck some rations aboard?" shouted Watson, and Cameron held up a bottle of Scotch and shouted back: "What the hell do you think this is?" The men laughed again and Cameron took a long drink and the bottle passed from hand to hand.

The early morning sun shone from a clear blue sky and the drab salt flats outside the town sparkled in the sunshine and looked as fresh and as crisp as snow. The coast road was fairly clear of traffic going away from Benghazi, and Jackson, seated on his pack at the back of the truck, watched the armoured cars and a few tanks heading towards the town, then he turned his head and watched an infantry regiment dismounting from trucks and getting into line ready to march into the town. Geordie threw his empty beer tin on to the road and Jackson watched it bounce, then fly

off the road. More empty tins were thrown out of the lorry, but Jackson was watching the tanks and armoured cars heading towards Benghazi.

"The Pay Corps were the first out. Did you know that?" shouted Watson.

"You dinna mean someone beat us to it?" shouted back Cameron sarcastically.

"The Pay Corps," repeated Watson. "Those bastards were the first out."

An Indian regiment marched towards the town. They moved easily with their rifles slung over their shoulders, and Jackson glimpsed their dark unsmiling faces as the lorry roared past them. Funny, he thought, they don't look all that bothered. He punched two holes in his beer can and jerked his head back as the beer squirted out, then he lifted the can to his lips and took a long drink, then stared at Geordie's big, red simple face and thought: yes, he should be running out of the town. He's so simple minded he'd try to shake hands with the enemy and ask them back to the billet for a booze up. And there's Jones who wears lenses two feet thick and still he can't see; but the rest of us are bursting with health and here we are running out and there they are going in. It's bloody ironic if you think about it. Geordie smiled and tossed an empty beer can on to the tarmac road, then quickly opened another can of beer smiling at Jackson all the time. "I like beer," he said. Jackson smiled back. "I know you do, Geordie."

Geordie drank greedily, then leaned back with a satisfied smile and glanced at Jackson again with his large blue child-like eyes. "Be seeing Cairo you reckon, Johnnie?"

"Maybe," said Jackson.

"I like Cairo," said Geordie.

"What do you like about Cairo?"

Geordie frowned and concentrated all his limited thoughts on the question. "Bars," he said after a long pause. "Get brandy cheap in a bar I know." He frowned even deeper as he concentrated again. "Girls," he said. "In the knocking shops it costs eight bob for a short time, but you can have a long time for a quid." He

smiled suddenly. "There's a black 'un I used to go to. She wraps her legs around me."

"You cunning old sex maniac, you," teased Jackson and thought: it's no good, I just can't imagine old Geordie on the job.

"Think we'll retreat to Suez?" called out Watson. "Think we'll catch a boat at Suez?"

"If we get that far," said Lynch. "What's to stop us going on to Palestine and digging in there?"

"You're a bad judge," said Jackson. "You thought we were heading for Tripoli."

"Next time," said Lynch.

"What bloody next time?" enquired Jackson.

"Next time," repeated Lynch. "You'll see, next time."

I know this place too well, thought Jackson. The salt flats, then the red earth and the plains outside Barce, then the pass and the town, and all along the coast road and the deserted farms and the empty houses, then the green belt and the stunted oak trees, then Derna Pass and the town. Must have been a nice little place in peace time. Then on to the desert and Tobruk and the coast road and the blue sea. Sollum, Hell Fire Pass, Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matru, know it like the back of my hand. So it's back to the desert I suppose. Back to square one. Nearer to Alex and Cairo anyway.

"You can't beat Rommel," shouted Watson as he threw an empty beer can on to the tarmac road and watched it bounce. "If we had generals like Rommel."

"And soldiers," jeered a voice from the back of the truck.

Cameron turned and looked at Green. "You big soft bastard, our boys are as good as any."

"Why ain't you with them then?" laughed Green.

"Aye," said Cameron. "When I see you shower I wonder me-self."

It was cold at the back of the truck so Jackson stepped over swearing and protesting bodies and sat next to Cameron. "What's up with you, Jock?" he enquired as he took the bottle of whisky from Cameron's hand.

"This heap make me want to vomit," growled Cameron.

"Belt up," laughed Green.

"You belt up," said Cameron, "or you'll land on your arse on that bloody tarmac road."

"No sense of humour," said Green as he moved to get out of Cameron's way.

Jackson smiled as he handed the bottle to Cameron. He knew what was troubling him. "These boys are all survival experts, Jock," he said.

"Aye, and you too," grunted Cameron.

"Yes, me too," said Jackson as he leaned back and made himself more comfortable.

The engine snarled and roared as Nobby put his foot down harder on the accelerator. This wasn't his first retreat and he knew the rules. Go flat out and pass everything ahead of you, and at every opportunity he passed the truck ahead of him, tooting the horn like a crazy man. Nobby was determined to put as much distance between him and the enemy in the shortest possible time. He had been anticipating this retreat ever since the last advance and had been scrounging spare parts and doctoring the engine for weeks, and beneath the battered old bonnet gleamed a priceless engine that could touch eighty miles an hour on the straight. The only machine on four wheels that could pass it was a general's staff car. Nobby swore and raved happily as he passed truck after truck.

There was no real panic until they reached Tokra Pass in the afternoon. The pass was choked with traffic and the military police were frantically trying to keep everything moving. The men, stiff and sore from the journey, jumped out of the lorry and looked skywards as they relieved themselves against the wheels. "Funny, no Stukas," said Lynch as he searched the sky with a puzzled expression. "Where the hell are the Stukas?"

"Yeah," said Watson. "Golden chance for them here."

"Maybe they're out of Stukas," said Lynch.

Jackson searched the sky in all directions, then glanced uneasily at the traffic-choked pass, and thought, be the easiest thing in the world to fly in, drop a few bombs, knock hell out of the pass and

that's the Eighth Army seen to. So damn simple. This is the only way out; a few bombs on the pass and Jerry could round us up at his leisure. He moved to the edge of the road, and gazed at the stationary vehicles ahead. We'll be stuck here at least two hours, he thought. Surely Jerry's not going to miss a chance like this. He glanced downwards into the valley and noticed a deep hole well protected by rocks. That's for me if they fly in and start dropping bombs, he thought, and judged the time it would take him to reach the hole. About ten seconds. He moved back to the truck and grinned at Lynch. "Maybe they're out of petrol."

"So they've no bombers and no petrol," said Cameron. "Then why the hell are we retreating?"

"They've still got plenty of Germans," said Jackson and all the men laughed.

Nobby climbed out of the driving cabin and nodded towards the pass. "Be here some time so what about a brew up and some grub?"

"No rations," said Watson handing him a can of beer.

"You're a dead loss, you bloody lot," said Nobby as he punctured the tin. "All right for you to go on a liquid diet but I've got to drive and I could use some grub. I'm starving."

"Light a fire," said Cameron, "and you and Lynch go and track down a Service Corps ration wagon and tell the fella in charge I want a word with him."

Lynch walked away and Nobby threw a cut down petrol tin on the side of the road and threw handfuls of earth into the tin then poured petrol over the earth and dropped a lighted match on it. Lynch returned with a Service Corps sergeant and Cameron handed the sergeant a case of beer and said: "We'd like some grub for that."

The sergeant, beaming with delight, shouted back: "You won't starve, mate," as he hurried away and very shortly he returned with three of his men. Two of them were staggering under the weight of a full side of beef and the other man carried tea, sugar, bread, margarine, plus tins of bully beef, bacon and stew. It's

marvellous, thought Jackson, watching the transaction. War simplifies everything.

Cameron, overwhelmed by the sergeant's generosity, presented him with a bottle of Scotch, and Watson, a butcher in civvy street, sat on the side of beef and cut away until he had a dozen juicy steaks ready to be cooked. By this time a curious crowd had collected and Watson, happy to be back at his old trade, continued cutting away and shouting, "I feel like Christ feeding the five thousand." The steaks were cooked on sticks over the fire and the men swilled them down with beer, and two hours later they were on the move again. They were held up on the Derna Pass, but by midnight they reached the town and parked the truck in a side street. The men stretched out and pulled their blankets up to their chins, but Cameron shouted as he jumped out of the truck: "You'll no have me sleeping in the streets."

He walked to the nearest house, lifted his boot and smashed the door open. "Unload the cases," he shouted as he entered the house.

The men quickly unloaded the cases from the truck, fitted blankets over the windows, lit a storm lamp and surveyed the billet. There was no furniture, the floors were filthy and the temperature was near or below freezing point. Cameron kicked the kitchen door off its hinges, then chopped it up and threw wood into the stove and poured petrol over the wood and soon the men thawed out. Cameron, methodically smashed the lavatory door and the two bedroom doors and piled the wood near the stove, then the men settled down for the night, apart from four who started a card school. They were unwashed, boozed up and heading in the general direction of Alexandria and Cairo and they were all hoping that Rommel would chase them out of Cyrenaica and into Egypt, then on to a boat in Suez. They all hated the Middle East and didn't want any part of it.

Jackson placed his hand on his wallet. He knew that he could trust Cameron, Lynch and Watson, but he was none too sure of the rest of the men. Green threw his cards on top of the blanket and swore as he left the card school. Jackson shook his head and declined to join in. He hadn't dreamed up a foolproof system to

fiddle NAAFI just to throw it away on a poker game. He banged his fist into his small pack and stretched out on the floor and covered himself with a blanket. The room was warm and he suddenly felt very drowsy. He closed his eyes and thought, I must write to Madge as soon as I'm settled in somewhere. Darling, I've been appointed Corporal in Supreme Command, Operation Retreat, and I need hardly add that I was the first man out. My own personal retreat, to hell with everybody else's, started in one of the major towns in Libya. I can't tell you the name of this town. The censor would strike it out with his blue pencil, but there is only one major town in Libya. Take my word for it and look it up on the map if you're interested. Anyway, this stinking, rat-infested, wog inhabited, cesspool, capital city of Cyrenaica laid on some entertainment for the troops the other day. . . .

Jackson's mind wandered. Six hundred, he thought, a good six hundred, queueing. Some of them I suppose have been dumped like me, but a lot of them must be what is laughingly called happily married men. Six hundred of them queueing for that. For six poor old bags. He chuckled to himself. I don't mind queueing for my grub, leave pass or pay, but queueing for that! He closed his eyes. The floor was hard but the room was warm and he fell asleep still thinking about the long, long queue, and in his dreams the queue grew longer and longer until every soldier in the world, all races, creeds and colours, joined the queue. All waiting impatiently for six battered old whores.

After breakfast next morning Cameron said: "I've had orders 'Next stop Tobruk'. We hole up there "

"Tobruk," said Jackson. "For Christ's sake, why Tobruk?"

"I ran into Black," said Cameron. "It's his idea."

"Tobruk," shouted Watson. "You know what it is? It's nothing but a bloody great dust bowl."

There was a lot of grumbling. Some of the men had been in Tobruk during the siege. The NAAFI bulk issue store and billet was an old corrugated iron, one-time Italian aeroplane hangar and

the sand blew in all the holes and cracks and settled on the floor, on the beds, on the food, everywhere. Even the drinking water was distilled from the sea and heavy with salt. The men loaded the truck and, still grumbling, climbed aboard, and soon the green hills of Derna and the stunted oak trees were left far behind and they were on the coast road staring morosely at the desert.

5

Captain Morris smiled pleasantly at Private Weaver who lay fully dressed on his bed. "Weaver, Sergeant Dunne tells me you haven't budged from your bed for the last two days."

Private Weaver opened his eyes, returned Captain Morris's pleasant smile, nodded his head and closed his eyes again.

"Two days, Weaver. Two days and nights, you mean you haven't once budged from your bed, Weaver?"

Weaver opened his eyes. "Well, only to go to the bog."

"What about meals?" enquired Captain Morris pleasantly.

"And meals," agreed Weaver, opening then closing his eyes again.

"You're not feeling poorly then?"

"Well," said Weaver, giving the question some thought, "can't say I feel poorly, no. I'd be a liar if I did. I'm brassed off, mind you. Real brassed off. But not poorly, no. Can't say I feel poorly."

"I see." Captain Morris sucked at his moustache. "Can't expect to be excused duties just because you're browned off, can you, Weaver?"

"Nine months in this hole," Weaver stared fixedly at Captain

Morris. "Here during the siege and I'm still here, and I'll be here a bloody long time by the look of things. Enough to make anybody browned off, isn't it?"

"But I've been here even longer than you, Weaver," said Captain Morris patiently.

"Ah, but you're an officer," said Weaver. "Piss-ups in the officers' mess, dances with the nurses."

"Did you say dances?" said Captain Morris. "Dances in Tobruk?"

"He must be out of his bloody mind," said Sergeant Dunne.

"You've had it cushy," said Weaver with his eyes closed. "You've been after the nurses' knickers. I don't begrudge it mind, but compared to me you've had it cushy. Pass the port, Charles." Weaver opened his eyes. "Who are you taking to kip tonight, old boy. Alice or Sue? Call that soldiering?" Weaver closed his eyes again.

Captain Morris looked at Sergeant Dunne who shrugged his shoulders. "Weaver," Captain Morris leaned forward. "I know you aren't a bad chap and until now you've worked jolly well, but if you don't get off that bed I'll have to put you on a charge."

Weaver rolled his eyes and stared at Captain Morris with a foolish grin. "I'm sticking for more pay and better conditions."

Captain Morris stepped back and said to Sergeant Dunne: "I'm beginning to think he is round the bend."

Sergeant Dunne looked puzzled. "I don't know, sir, I still think he's trying to work his ticket."

"All right, sergeant. Chuck it at him."

Sergeant Dunne picked up a bucket of water and, taking careful aim, he dashed the water over Weaver.

For a few moments Weaver didn't move, then he gasped and sat up and shook himself like a dog and stared reproachfully at Captain Morris. "You didn't have to do that," he said, and lay back and closed his eyes again.

Captain Morris turned and saw Jackson, Cameron and the rest of the new arrivals staring at him. He smiled. "Hello, where are you chaps from?"

"Benghazi," said Cameron.

"Heard about it on the news. Did you have a rough trip?"

"No," said Cameron as he stared at Weaver.

Captain Morris looked down at Weaver. "Don't think he's sand happy. Think he's trying to swing the lead. You chaps settle yourselves in and report to me at 0900 hours tomorrow." He smiled pleasantly and marched out of the billet.

"Who's that bloody idiot?" said Jackson.

"One of the best," said Sergeant Dunne. "He'll do anything sooner than put a man on a fizzer."

"So I've noticed," said Jackson as he walked over to Weaver. "Hello, Harry."

Weaver slowly opened his eyes then smiled at Jackson. "You're slipping, finishing up in this dump."

"I must be," agreed Jackson. "What are you trying to pull?"

"I'm on strike for better pay and better conditions," said Weaver through his chattering teeth.

"No," said Jackson, shaking his head. "Think up a better one."

"I'll make Cairo yet," shivered Weaver.

"Or the nuthouse, Harry."

Weaver gave Jackson's remark some thought. "I might make a speedy recovery once I get to Cairo."

"You might get double bloody pneumonia if you don't get out of those wet togs."

"Then I'll make Cairo," said Weaver shivering madly.

Cameron looked at Weaver. "He won't have to try hard to get into the crazy house. They'll welcome him with open arms."

"I think you're right," agreed Jackson as he stared at the corrugated iron walls and roof. The sky could be glimpsed through the holes in the roof where shrapnel fragments had damaged it. "I don't know how or why it's still standing," he added.

"They'll never flatten this," said Sergeant Dunne.

Jackson was still inspecting the billet. "Jock, I'm not staying here," he said.

"It's a landmark," said Sergeant Dunne. "Jerry won't do it because it's a landmark."

"Aye, that must be the explanation," said Cameron. "If you farted loud enough the place would crumble."

Jackson threw his kit beside an empty bed. A stretcher supported by four petrol tins. "There must be a nice safe hole somewhere in Tobruk, Jock," he said as he lay on the bed and pulled a blanket up to his chin, "and after I've had a kip, I'm going in search of it."

Twenty concrete steps led down to the bunker. It was, in Sergeant Taylor's opinion, as safe as a bank vault. Bunks were lined against the walls in tiers of three. There were fifteen bunks all told, but only eight were occupied. Sergeant Taylor who had appointed himself OC Bunker, would only allow drunken, no-good bastards to live in it. In his opinion, they were the only people worth saving. Taylor was an ex-public school man. Ex-six public schools, in fact. He was a confirmed drunkard and a devout coward. Alf Edwards, his best chum and constant drinking companion, was an ex-graduate of Borstal, Wormwood Scrubs, the Ville and other similar institutions. The other members of this exclusive club also had little or nothing to recommend them for a place in decent society.

Taylor poured himself a drink, then smiled as another member of the club staggered down the steps and fell flat on his face. "Upsy daisy, my dear old Irish nightingale," he said pleasantly, but did not attempt to help the man to his feet. Paddy O'Neill got to his knees, reached out a trembling hand and picked up the nearest cup and held it out for Taylor to slop a generous measure of whisky into it.

Private Paddy O'Neill had been in Tobruk ten months but it was only on Sunday mornings that he really had any idea where he was. The rest of the week he was blind drunk. During the siege, Captain Morris, who prided himself on being a pretty easy going chap, had seriously thought about shipping O'Neill out but had suddenly discovered that at long last, he had run across some-

one whom he really hated, and once he had made this astounding discovery, he simply could not be parted from O'Neill.

All his life Captain Morris had been convinced that he was a freak because he simply could not hate anyone. Not even the school bully. Not even his wife who was a terrible bloody bitch, but at long last Paddy O'Neill had come into his life and daily he hoped that a stray bomb or a piece of shrapnel would put an end to him, yet at the same time he hoped it wouldn't. For months he had kept an anxious eye on O'Neill who he knew wandered about the desert at all hours of the day or night, oblivious to bombs and falling shrapnel, but here he was ten months later still alive and kicking. The heavy drinking was the gravest danger. Captain Morris had taken a bet with himself that O'Neill couldn't possibly last another three months. Every night O'Neill fell into his bed dead drunk and before he got out of his bed the next morning he was well on the way to being drunk again, and all day long he tottered about Tobruk from one buried bottle to the next. This task kept him fully occupied. In the mornings he would roam the desert burying bottles of beer, gin or whisky, and during the afternoons or evenings he would unearth the bottles with the aid of a compass. He could never find all the bottles, but with his compass and the instincts of a water diviner, he unearthed sufficient bottles to keep him in a state of perpetual drunkenness and if he hadn't had much luck, or even if he had, there was always Sergeant Taylor to turn to for a drop of the hard stuff.

But on Sunday mornings O'Neill was always sober. That was the day that Father McSweeney paid him a visit and O'Neill was always washed, clean-shaved and waiting for the good Father and ready to pour out his confession. Every Sunday it was the same. "It's the sins of the flesh, Father. Now you wouldn't think a fella would be troubled with such things in a dump like this, would you now? But I'm telling you'se Father, the thoughts that go racing through me head are that evil I can hardly look you'se in the eye." Whenever Father McSweeney tried to put a word in, O'Neill would silence him, "No, hear me out, Father, will you, or I'm telling you'se I'll never be able to confess to it. It's women that

prey on me mind, you see. Big, powerful, heavy breasted women they are, begging me to sin with them. I fight them mind, but they keep coming back. There's this red-headed Jezebel now. I wouldn't know her name, not being as you might say properly acquainted wid her, but Jasas, Father, she worries the life out of me..." On and on about his fictitious women and sins of the flesh, but hardly any mention of drink. "Well, sure, Father, I have a nip now and then to keep out the cold, but I'm not the man to abuse a comfort."

O'Neill drained his cup and held it out to be refilled.

"Paddy," said Edwards. "Do you know where you are?"

"Sure I know where I am," said O'Neill.

"Where are you then?"

"Same place as you'se, where else?"

"And where's that, Paddy?"

"If you don't know where the hell you are, Alfie, it's a sad thing, so it is."

"You're in dear old Ireland then, are you, Paddy?"

"That's so," said O'Neill. "Ireland it is, where the hell else would I be?"

"Can you hear the shamrock growing, Paddy?"

O'Neill cocked his ear and listened. "To be honest," he said, "I can't hear a damn thing growing. Now will you'se tip up that bottle."

"You're in bloody Tobruk," said Edwards.

"The fella's out of his mind," said O'Neill still holding out his cup. "Tobruk says he! I've never heard of it. Now pour us a drink and shut your gob and I'll give you a song," and he sang "Come back to Erin".

The singing woke Jackson up. He had heard that voice before and the owner of the voice was one of the best survival experts in the business, and Jackson decided to track him down. He was surprised that he hadn't noticed the steps before. As he hurried down them, he gazed about him, then glanced upwards. There's about ten feet of solid concrete up there, he calculated as he slapped his hand against the wall, and the walls are solid too.

Taylor, who could instantly recognise a devout coward, poured a drink, and Jackson took the cup and yelled happily up the stairs: "Jock, bring my kit down—I'm home."

Captain Morris found it much too easy to like people, with the exception of O'Neill, but he was finding it pretty hard going trying to like Captain Black. He nervously stroked his moustache, smiled, leaned back more comfortably in his chair, then suddenly sprang to his feet, opened a cupboard and took out a bottle of whisky and two glasses and placed them on the table, then with a jolly friendly laugh said: "God, nearly forgot my manners," as he poured a drink.

Captain Black shook his head. "No thanks, Morris."

Morris felt uneasy again. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I feel there's rather too much drinking being done."

"Oh, you do?" Morris stared at his glass of whisky, then carefully sat down and crossed his legs.

"And the fighting men aren't the ones doing all the drinking, Morris."

"No." Morris smiled and plucked at his moustache. "They don't get much chance to do that. The men get a bottle of beer a fortnight and the officers a bottle of whisky a month." He stared at his glass. Just because he's not drinking, he thought, that's no damn reason why I shouldn't have the odd one. Dammit, I'm only trying to be sociable. Defiantly he picked up his glass and sipped it, then placed it carefully on the table.

"I closed the bar in Benghazi, Morris. The chaps got drunk and wrecked it."

"Sorry to hear that." Captain Morris was wondering who was the senior officer. He had an uneasy feeling that Black had been made up to captain before him. That being so, he would probably take command, and the prospects of serving under Captain Black did not exactly cheer him up.

"I inspected the billet, Morris, pretty bloody disgusting."

Morris nodded his head. "Sand."

"What's that?"

"Gets in everywhere."

"Sand," snorted Captain Black. "I know it's sand and I know it gets in everywhere. Tobruk's a dust bowl."

"A dust bowl," agreed Morris.

"I know, but you could detail some men to sweep the billet couldn't you?"

"I have," said Morris, gulping down his drink and quickly refilling his glass.

Captain Black stared at the large measure of whisky that Morris poured into his glass and twitched his nose. Another one on the booze, he inwardly groaned. He's as jumpy as a cricket. How the hell can he expect to maintain discipline if he's hitting the bottle. "Morris," he said firmly. "You'll have to smarten the chaps up."

Captain Morris stared sullenly at his drink. He's an awful miserable bastard, he thought. These bloody TT wallahs really do get me down. The odd drink's never hurt any man. "They're a decent enough bunch of chaps," he said mildly.

"Smarthen them up," repeated Captain Black who had decided that he must take command.

"They've had a pretty rough time of it, Black."

"Discipline! Must maintain discipline and the sooner you start remembering that, the better."

"They've been living under pretty foul conditions. Most of them should have been relieved ages ago and sent back to base. The rations have been ghastly, even the drinking water is . . ."

"Salt. I know," snapped Captain Black.

"Makes you vomit your guts up." Captain Morris was rather proud of his men. They had stood up to hardships well. Some of them were pretty deadly of course, O'Neill, Edwards, Taylor, that crew. Should he mention them to Black? No damn fear. Taylor was a pretty hopeless case. An alcoholic, awful pity. He obviously came from a decent family and he was such a likeable chap. Let Black ferret out the defaulters for himself. He had never put a chap on a fizzer and he wasn't going to start now. Treat a chap decently, he reasoned, and in time the blighter will catch on. It's as simple as that.

"The fighting men are issued salt water, Morris," sneered Captain Black.

Morris stroked his moustache to the left and then to the right. "Some of our chaps have been fighting," he said quietly.

"What?"

"Manning the gun."

"What the hell are you talking about, Morris?"

"Did you notice the ack-ack gun outside?" Morris nodded to the window.

"Yes, and it's rather too close to the bulk store to be healthy." And to my billet, Black thought to himself.

"They help me man it," said Captain Morris, "and they aren't bad either."

"We aren't in the bloody artillery," shouted Captain Black. "I've never heard such crap in my life. You can bloody well dismantle it."

Captain Morris's left eye twitched and he felt acutely embarrassed. This chap's getting on my nerves, he thought. Who the hell does he think he's shouting at. He leaned his elbow on the table and covered the left side of his face with his hand. "But the men enjoy working the gun," he protested. "It gives them something to do."

"I'm surprised the bulk store's still standing," yelled Captain Black. "Do you realise you're jeopardising about half a million quid's worth of stores? You must be out of your mind."

"For God's sake," said Morris, for once losing his temper. "We man the gun because we don't want the bloody Germans to drop bombs on us, or on the store."

"You bloody fool," shouted Captain Black. "You're inviting the enemy to bomb the store flat. I'm giving you an order, Morris. Dismantle the gun."

Captain Morris's hand trembled as he refilled his glass. "If you want the gun dismantled, then you'd better give the order."

"I shall." Captain Black sat up very straight in his chair. "You weren't posted to Tobruk to take charge of an ack-ack battery. Where the hell did you get the gun anyway?"

"Well, as a matter of fact . . ." began Captain Morris, then had enough sense to think first before launching into a full explanation. Captain Morris had in fact bought the gun for a case of whisky and five hundred Players cigarettes from an artillery colonel who had also loaned a sergeant to instruct Captain Morris and his gun team in the handling of the gun. The colonel, of course, wrote off the gun as lost due to enemy action and Morris became the proud owner of one ack-ack gun. Morris cleared his throat. "Some artillery chaps cleared out and left it behind," he said.

"Well, I'll see it's moved. Now, your next job, Morris, is to detail some of your chaps to clean up the billet."

"Right ho," replied Morris.

"And they all need a hair cut."

"We haven't got a barber."

"You can find one, can't you, Morris?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

God, thought Captain Black, this man's a bloody idiot. "And I want them on parade every morning, washed and shaved," he said.

"Salt water."

"What?"

"Damn hard work getting a lather with salt water."

"You've got salt water soap, haven't you, Morris?"

"Well yes, but it doesn't seem to work all that well."

"You manage it, don't you?"

"Well, yes," agreed Morris, but did not tell Captain Black that he used beer instead of salt water for shaving.

"Then don't talk such crap," said Captain Black. "The men will parade every morning and RSM Hart will inspect them, so you'd better put the word around. Tell the men that if they know what's good for them they'll be properly dressed and washed and shaved when they show up on parade." Captain Black stood up, nodded curtly to Captain Morris and marched out.

Captain Morris swore under his breath as he topped up his glass. He was worried. Someone else had turned up whom he instinctively hated. Maybe I've been too long in Tobruk, he thought. The bloody place must be getting me down. He realised with a sense

of shock that he hated Captain Black even more than he hated O'Neill who was the most drunken, lazy, desolute, completely lacking in any redeeming qualities, bastard he had ever set eyes on and God knows, he thought, I really have tried with O'Neill. I've let him get away with absolute bloody murder. Every day someone's reported to me that O'Neill is pinching booze, and burying it all over the desert, and still I haven't put him on a fizzer. He's a drunken, useless bloody monster. He's only sub-human, but I'd sooner have him than Black any day. He drained his glass and in a sudden rage threw it against the wall. "Dismantle my gun, you rotten bastard," he shouted. "You'd even go as far as that."

After three days and nights in Tobruk, Jackson was completely and absolutely fed up. The food was even more revolting than usual. The cook, a happy little gnome with sand-encrusted lank hair, could be heard laughing to himself as he stirred away with a large wooden spoon at his filthy bully-beef stew. Jackson had watched him adding tins of peas, or carrots, Worcester sauce, Oxo cubes, pepper, salt, mustard, and a stolen bottle of sherry, or Australian Brown Ale, or even whisky. Listening to the cook's happy laughter, Jackson knew that he was crazy.

The cook had been in Tobruk for ten months, and was completely sand happy and round the bend. His secret dream was to be the head chef at either the Ritz Hotel or the Savoy when the war ended. His speciality would be bully-beef stew, and people would travel from the ends of the earth to taste it. He would become world famous. Jackson hated the cook on sight. Apart from the ghastly food, the man's appalling cheerfulness deeply offended Jackson. No one living in Tobruk should be so disgustingly happy. The cook, the food, the cold winds that blew across the desert, stirring the sand that penetrated his clothes, eyes, ears. The sick-making salt-water tea, and every night the enemy planes dropping bombs. All these things were getting Jackson down. He stared at the sunken ships and the white shells that were once houses, clustered around the harbour. "So this is Tobruk," he said.

"Aye," Cameron looked equally disgusted, "and God knows how long we'll be stuck here."

"The army's still retreating." Jackson turned his back on the harbour and stared at the desert. "And I bet they give this dump a miss and head for Alex." He glared in silent fury at the drab desert, and thought: they'll keep going if they've got any sense. Who wants this dump? Has it been any use to us? The papers and the politicians have turned a graveyard for the Aussies and our lads into a morale booster. We've only held on to it to give the old folks at home a gee up. Christ, we've done well, we've lost every battle so far, so we have to hold on to Tobruk and claim it as a victory or something. It's all bullshit. Tobruk's not worth a light. It's only a cock-eyed piece of propaganda. "Jock," he said, "I bet it won't be long before Jerry gets here."

Cameron nodded his head. "You could be right."

Jackson pointed. "Just imagine a line of tanks poking their noses over that little slope and heading this way, then behind them a regiment of square-heads screaming for blood."

"Aye," said Cameron. "That's an interesting thought."

"Heading right for us," shivered Jackson.

"Well, if we're stuck here, we're stuck here," said Cameron reasonably.

"Defeatist thinking, Jock."

"You canna just walk out."

"Taylor's doing his best to get out. He's had a bellyful of Tobruk."

"Och, he's a dead loss."

"I know," Jackson squinted towards the NAAFI bulk issue store in the distance, "but he's got the right idea."

"They won't be posting any of us out."

"Hawthorne's being sent back to Cairo in a day or two."

"Is that a fact?"

Jackson smiled and nodded his head. "Why should he be the only one?"

"He's due for a court martial so he has to go back to base. But we won't be escaping from here. You ken what I think, Johnnie.

It's here the Eighth Army's going to make a stand. It's here we'll see the deciding battle of this war."

Jackson stared across the desert and found it very easy to imagine a regiment of Huns charging at him. All anxious to be the first to stick a bayonet into his guts and lift him screaming into the air.

"You know where Hawthorne will wind up," said Cameron. "In the bloody glasshouse."

Jackson licked his dry lips. "Jock, the glasshouse could be a damn sight more comfortable than here, and if Jerry breaks through, and I can't see anything much here to stop him, then we'll either get six feet of sand apiece or, at the best, spend the rest of the war in a POW cage."

"Och. Jerry will no take Tobruk."

"Don't you be so bloody sure."

"I'll take my chance," said Cameron complacently.

"You're a thick-headed Scots nit," said Jackson.

"Aye, and you're a bloody coward."

"Who's arguing," smiled Jackson. "Somehow I'm getting out of this dump. I've got a funny feeling that this is going to be a very unhealthy seaside resort pretty soon."

"And how do you think you'll get out?"

"Don't know," said Jackson. "I'll just have to play it by ear."

"On your feet," thundered RSM Hart.

O'Neill squinted up at him. Big fella, this one, he thought. Wonder what the hell his occupation is? Maybe he's the chucker-outer. "I told you, on your bloody feet," raved the voice near his ear. Jasas, thought O'Neill, he must be desperate for the job, the racket he's making. I'll stir meself the hell out of here and make me way to Finches. "On your bloody feet," roared the voice again. "That's an order." Jasas, thought O'Neill, that's a big ugly gob he's got and the breath on him's as putrid as a polecat's. O'Neill, still clinging to his tin cup, eased his backside off the box he was seated on and fell on his ear. The bastard's using violence, he thought, but he still held on to his tin cup and tried desperately not to spill a

drop of the precious liquid. The big red face lurched towards him again and a hand as big as a York ham snatched the cup from his fingers. The dirty bastard, thought O'Neill, he's nothing more than a common thief. "Dead drunk, ain't you," howled the voice. "You're dead drunk." Jasas, he's a violent man, this one, thought O'Neill. I'll not give him any excuse to beat me brains in. "You pinched it, didn't you?" howled the voice again. "You bloody pinched it." I'll close me eyes, thought O'Neill, and maybe he'll go away. O'Neill closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

RSM Hart gazed at the recumbent figure at his feet then stared at Taylor. "He's dead drunk, sergeant, and he's a thief."

"I gave it to him, old sport," said Taylor, cheerfully.

RSM Hart stared at Taylor's lined, dissipated face. He noted the red-rimmed eyes and the black circles beneath the eyes, and the three-day beard on the cheeks, upper lip and chin. The hair, long, uncombed and crusted with sand. He glanced towards the slovenly uniform and the suede desert boots. Jesus Christ, he thought, and this one's supposed to be a sergeant. I wouldn't give him a job as a knocking-house doorman. "Old sport," he said through his clenched teeth. "Is this the way you bleedin' well address a regimental sergeant-major? Old sport? You address me as sir, as if you don't know. Now let's see you on your feet, sergeant. Move!"

Sergeant Taylor slowly stood up. "Pardon me a moment," he said as he moved to a corner at the far end of the bunker, "but this can't wait."

Hart's mouth opened in astonishment as he stared at Taylor's back. "You're pissing," he shouted. "You're pissing in your own billet. Where do you think you are, at home?" A Mick, yes he thought, or a bloody Scots booze-up artist, or a bleedin' Welsh leek. I've had to house-train a few in my day, but this one's supposed to be a bloody NCO. He switched his attention to Private Alf Edwards, and thought, I'll deal with this one first. "Nice little dug-out you've got here, ain't you, sitting on your arses boozing all day. On your feet. Move!"

"Take a running jump," said Edwards.

RSM Hart stared at him. "What was that?"

"Take a walk you fat-gutted, useless, bloody article," said Edwards as Taylor returned clutching a bottle of whisky in his hand. "Fill me up, Mike," he added as he held out his tin mug. Taylor smiled and poured Edwards a drink.

RSM Hart wondered if he was hearing things as he gazed at Edwards and Taylor. When he had enlisted in the Guards in the latter end of the hungry twenties he had not at first taken too kindly to the harsh discipline, but from the day that he had been promoted, and in his turn did a great deal of shouting, life had taken on a somewhat rosier glow. He enjoyed using his authority. In the Guards men obeyed orders at the double and no questions asked. To maintain discipline all an NCO had to do was shout loud enough and his orders were obeyed. What could be more simple, straightforward and uncomplicated?

RSM Hart shifted his attention to Paddy O'Neill, lying curled up on the floor, still clutching his tin cup, and Hart had an almost irresistible urge to kick him to death as he stared at the man's lank, black hair, unshaven chin, and disgustingly dirty uniform. Have some cold water thrown over him, he thought, and scrubbed. He turned a hard cold stare on Edwards, who appeared to be totally unaware of RSM Hart's presence. He was swilling his whisky round and round in his tin mug and smiling to himself. Taylor had sat down again and was sipping his whisky with obvious enjoyment. Hart continued staring balefully at Edwards while he tried to collect his thoughts. For once in his life he felt somewhat out of his depth and he wanted a little time to carefully consider this somewhat unique situation.

When Hart had been offered the post as RSM in charge of NAAFI personnel, he had delightedly accepted it. He had the experience to back him. Hadn't he trained a few thousand raw recruits in his day? But he had not bargained for such an undisciplined shower of beaten-up, drunken rabble as some of the NAAFI men that he had encountered, and he had been amazed to discover that none of the officers had been to OCTU. So the few officers he had met, with the exception of Major Winters in Cairo, and Captain Black, showed absolutely no interest or

knowledge of basic discipline. One bright young NAAFI officer had cheerfully informed him: "Counter hands, that's all they are, sergeant-major. Ex-barmen, grocery assistants and waiters, and a few crooks who wangled their way in somehow, but most of the chaps can be counted on to do a damn good job and we're much too busy to find time for drills, parades, bull, and all that old rubbish. I'm more interested to see whether or not their stock books tally, and keeping a sharp eye on the odd fiddler."

RSM Hart remembered the cheerful young officer's words as he continued to stare at Edwards. And this is the result, he thought. This rubbish. This muck. Can't do anything with men if you don't discipline them and I'll smarten this shower up. He braced his shoulders. Right, now how do I stand, he wondered. I've given them orders. Done a bit of shouting, but all to no avail. Right, now what's the next move? I'm not going to stand here all day shouting my blinking head off. Waste of time, but they'd better get to know who they're dealing with. Me. RSM Hart, and the sooner the better. I'll take it calm. Try and be reasonable and let them know just where they bloody stand then I'll throw the book at them and watch them sweat. I'll get them to respect my rank if it's the last thing I ever do. They're drunk. All of them. Blue, blind, paralytic drunk. Must be, he reasoned, or they wouldn't dare behave like this. Have to charge all three of them. Charge them with being drunk and disorderly for a start, and I'll have the sergeant for fouling his own nest. Nice bloody example to set the men, that is. I'll soon have them stripes off his arm. But first, I'll have him as a witness against these other two. He spoke quietly. "You heard what this man said, sergeant?"

"Pardon?" Taylor held his hand to his ear.

"You're not deaf, sergeant. You heard what this man called me and you'll testify."

"As a post, sportsman," said Taylor cheerfully.

"Sergeant, now I'm warning you."

"Why don't you give it a rest?" said Taylor as he poured himself a drink and sat down.

"Right," said RSM Hart. "You ain't being very clever. You're

playing right into me hands and drunkenness is no excuse, so from here on I'll do the talking. So let's start from the beginning. I'll introduce myself so there's no mistake. I'm RSM Hart and I'm in charge of discipline. Got that? Regimental Sergeant-Major Hart. That penetrated your thick skulls?"

"Hart," said Edwards as he turned to Taylor. "Think I've got him placed now. Yeah, knew his mum, I did. He must be from the same bleedin' tribe by the look of him. She was a right old cow, used to hawk it round the Elephant and Castle."

RSM Hart's face turned brick red. He bunched his fists.

"I wouldn't if I were you, old sportsman," said Taylor, shaking his head. "Honestly, old Alfie plays it awfully rough."

"I'm a very naughty boy," said Edwards. "When I'm upset. I'd stick a broken bottle in your mug as soon as look at you, so why don't you piss off?"

RSM Hart willed himself to remain calm. "You're all under close arrest. I'll have an armed guard here inside five minutes," he said as he marched up the steps.

Edwards gazed into his tin mug. "Reckon that will get us to Cairo, Mike?"

Taylor smiled. "I should think so."

"About time, too." Edwards carefully placed his tin mug on a wooden box. "It's the sand, it gets you down. Gets into everything."

I know, thought Taylor. It's the sand. In the end it drives you crazy. I'm drinking myself to death and I know it. I'm drinking myself to death.

O'Neill sat up and looked about him. "Has that crazy bastard left us in peace?" he enquired.

"Yes, my old nightingale," said Taylor. "Now, what about a song?"

"The Pale Moon was Rising," sang O'Neill.

"Back to Cairo and all three of them will face a court martial," said Captain Black.

"Yes, sir," agreed RSM Hart standing ramrod stiff facing Captain Black across the desk.

"Keep them under close arrest," warned Captain Black.

"Where?" enquired Captain Morris with a bland smile.

"What?" Captain Black turned and stared at Morris.

"There's no guardroom," grinned Morris.

"There damn well has to be a guardroom," said Captain Black.

"We can't have prisoners mixing with the other chaps."

"There's only the billet or the bunker."

"Right, we'll keep them in the bunker. All prisoners will be confined to the bunker, under armed guard. Is that understood?"

"It's the air-raid shelter."

"It's now the guardroom, Morris."

"But every night there's an air-raid," protested Morris, showing the whites of his eyes.

"The men will use the guardroom," snapped Captain Black.

"It's not the guardroom, it's the air-raid shelter."

"Morris, I've enough on my plate without you putting up futile, silly bloody arguments. Tomorrow, or at the latest, the day after tomorrow, I'm shipping the damned lot of them to Cairo under armed escort and every one of them will face a court martial."

Captain Morris relaxed and leaned back in his chair with a glum expression on his face. "Right ho," he said listlessly.

"I'm going to make an example of these men." Captain Black glanced towards RSM Hart. "So that's Hawthorne, Edwards, Taylor and O'Neill."

"For a start, sir," agreed RSM Hart.

Black nodded. "I'm sure that others will join them. March them to the guardroom."

"Sir," beamed RSM Hart as he threw up a smart salute and marched out.

"Morris," pondered Captain Black. "You've let everything go hang here, haven't you? There's no discipline. The men do just as they damn well like. Taylor, Edwards, O'Neill, all rotten drunk when they appeared before me, and don't tell me for God's sake that you didn't know what was going on. It's your job to know. It's

your job to check on everyone. I shouldn't have to damn well tell you. You're supposed to be an officer and I'm none too pleased at what I've seen here. Well, Morris, I know my duty even if you don't. I'm sending a full report of conditions as I found them in Tobruk back to HQ Cairo, and I'll be surprised if you aren't sent for and asked to give a pretty detailed account about what's been going on. I'll be very much surprised."

Captain Morris wasn't listening. He was gazing out of the window watching a group of soldiers dismantling his precious ack-ack gun. He nervously pulled at his moustache. He was going to miss his dear old gun. What would he do the next time there was a raid? Banging away at the old enemy wasn't so bad, gave a chap something to do; but lying down just bloody well taking it. . . . He shivered.

"Morris, I'm speaking to you; you damn well listen."

Captain Morris stood up and glared at Captain Black. "You're a prize prick," he snarled as he walked out of the room, and slammed the door behind him.

"What the hell are you doing searching through my kit?" enquired Cameron.

Sergeant Matthews kicked Cameron's kit-bag. "Pick it up and get out of here."

"I'll ask you again," said Cameron. "What the hell are you doing going through my kit?"

"Orders."

"Whose orders?"

"RSM Hart's."

"What are the orders?"

"Search the kits for stolen booze."

"Whose kits?"

"Everybody's," shouted Matthews. "I'm obeying orders."

"Then why wasn't I notified," said Cameron. "Why the hell wasn't I present when you were going through my kit?"

"This is the guardroom," blustered Matthews. "Your kit shouldn't be here. Only prisoners' kit should be here."

"I wasn't notified this was the guardroom," said Cameron.

"Well, you bloody well know now." Matthews picked up Cameron's pack and threw it up the steps.

A pained expression lingered in Cameron's eyes as he said: "You'd better get your skates on and bring that back to me fast."

Matthews pushed him. "Get the rest of your kit and get out of here."

"You struck me," said Cameron with a gentle smile.

"I'll do more than that," shouted Matthews as he pushed Cameron towards the steps. "Get out of here; that's an order."

"I'll claim self defence," said Cameron as he hit Matthews on the chin and watched him stagger back like a drunken man. Matthews was big and strong. The blow didn't put him down but his eyes glazed and his legs trembled and could hardly support him. Cameron looked surprised. That was a great punch I landed, he thought. A bloody lovely left hook and it landed clean on the right spot. The big, stupid bastard should have gone down and stayed down. Maybe I'm losing my touch.

He watched Matthews leaning against the wall with his mouth wide open. Hawthorne walked over to him. "Remember me?" he shouted as he hit Matthews clean between the eyes and laughed like a maniac as Matthews' head hit the wall and he slowly slid down into a sitting position. One of the guards lifted his rifle with the intention of cracking the butt over Hawthorne's head, but Edwards sent him sprawling on to his knees. The second guard ran up the steps, terrified. "Remember me?" shouted Hawthorne again as he slammed his big ammo boots into the recumbent body lying on the floor. Cameron pulled Hawthorne away and threw him on to a bunk and Hawthorne started laughing and couldn't stop.

"You've done it now," shouted the guard as he climbed to his feet.

"Outside!" Cameron pushed him and he stumbled up the steps.

Hawthorne stopped laughing just as quickly as he had started

and everyone was silent as they stared at Matthews lying on the floor.

I hit him, thought Hawthorne. I hit him right between the eyes. He glared at the grazed skin on his knuckles and a cold shiver ran down his spine. First I turned a desk over that bastard Black, then I got drunk when under close arrest, then I refused to take my punishment and now I've punched Matthews clean between the eyes and put the boot in. Why? Am I going crazy? How did it all start? A booze up. Just an old booze up. Trying to enjoy myself. What's wrong with that? Then getting a bit reckless and telling Sergeant Pilgrim he was a bloody old woman and the bloody old queen put me on a charge . . . Hawthorne ground his teeth. My bloody stutter. That's the thing that always drops me in it, my bloody stutter. Can I help it if I stutter? I'm not too bad if I don't get tensed up. That bloody lunatic Black giving me permission to stutter. I mean giving a bloke with a stutter permission to stutter. How crazy can you get? Was I supposed to stand for that? Does he think I like making a bloody exhibition of myself?

Hawthorne cast a despairing glance around the bunker. This lot here are all hard cases. Cameron and Edwards are real "punch-up" artists, and old school tie Taylor, very clever lad he is; and that crafty old sod Jackson could talk his way out of anything and old Paddy O'Neill always gets away with murder. They're all experts, all first-class dodgers, but I'm not. I'm always trying to keep out of trouble. I'm not like this lot. I don't go looking for it. If brains counted for anything, I could lose the lot of them. Why did I put one on Matthews? I hate his guts and he is a mean bastard, but that was a daft thing to do. Hawthorne looked at Cameron who was kneeling over Matthews.

"How is he, Jock?"

"He looks like a hospital case," said Cameron.

"Good," said Hawthorne, and meant it. Then he shivered again. That's another charge I'll have to answer. I'm deep in it now. It'll be the glasshouse so long they'll think I'm a permanent fixture and they won't discover me until they demolish the bloody place. They'll find me in one of the cellars with a dirty great long grey

beard. My bloody stutter, he thought. It's always landing me in it. Try telling that to the president of the court martial. It wouldn't have happened, sir, none of it, if I didn't stutter. He'd think I'm raving mad, but that's the reason. I only go on the booze because it eases up the old stutter: well, it relaxes me and I can chat the same as everybody else. Better, I can get them all at it and have them killing themselves laughing. When I'm boozed up I'm the life and soul of the party, but it's a pity I didn't stay off the booze. Pity I didn't keep my big trap shut. Hawthorne shivered again.

"Where's me compass?" said O'Neill as he staggered towards his bunk. "I've a journey to make."

"You're under close arrest, Paddy," said Edwards.

"Eh?" O'Neill found his compass and gazed at it lovingly.

"You're a bloody prisoner," said Edwards.

"Prisoner?" O'Neill staggered towards the steps. "You've a funny sense of humour, so you have. I'm from the land of saints and scholars and Jasas. We're all free men, so we are." He staggered up the steps and went in search of his buried treasure.

"Hawthorne's deep in it," said Edwards. "If he carries on like this he'll end up facing a firing squad."

"Don't care," said Hawthorne and made a mental note that he didn't stutter. I've had just the right amount of booze, he thought. Now if I could be just as I am now when I face the president of the court, I could put up some kind of bloody defence and get my point of view over for a change.

"You'd better dream up some smart defence," said Edwards. "Though how you're gonna explain the state Matthews is in..."

Hawthorne laughed mirthlessly as he pictured himself standing ramrod stiff facing a court martial stuttering like a lunatic. He had a wonderful defence, he was a nervous wreck and therefore wasn't responsible for his actions. He was an afflicted, nervous wreck, but he would never be able to explain this. He wouldn't be able to get a single coherent word out, so he hadn't got a chance in hell.

He stretched out on the bunk and lit a cigarette. May as well face up to it, he thought. I've had my chips. May get away with about five years if I'm lucky, but probably get ten. He relaxed

and suddenly felt much more cheerful. Hawthorne was always at his best when he faced up to disasters. Glad I belted and booted him, he thought. Whatever happens it was worth it. Matthews is a mean cross-eyed fascist bastard, and he deserved all he got. He wriggled about on the bunk and made himself more comfortable. Feel great now, he thought. They can do what they like. Feel nice and relaxed; lovely old feeling. Pity I can't feel like this all the time.

RSM Hart walked down the steps accompanied by an armed guard. No one spoke as he gazed about him then moved and looked down at Matthews. "Who's responsible for this?" he enquired, turning to Cameron.

"I caught him going through my kit," said Cameron, "and when I protested he started shoving me around so I had to thump him in self defence."

"You made a bloody nasty job of it, didn't you?" snarled RSM Hart, then turned as Hawthorne laughed and stared bleakly at him.

Hawthorne sat up on his bunk and a gleeful smile spread across his face.

"It was me," he chuckled. "I clocked him then put the boot in."

"Did you?" shouted Hart. "Did you now? Assault an NCO and near kick him to death would you? Making quite a name for yourself, aren't you?"

"All this bull." Hawthorne settled back again glowing with an inner self satisfaction because he felt so relaxed and completely fearless. I'll tell him this once just what I think.

"It's all this b-b-bull..." He panicked for a moment as his lips twisted and would not pronounce the words, then he took a deep breath and calmed down again.

"Bullshit," he said clearly. "All this bullshit. A lot of lun-lun-lunatics like you and Matthews and B-B-Black shouting all the time. You go lob-loo-looking for trouble and when you ca-can't find it, you make it. You're nothing but a—a—a fat-gutted useless bastard."

"That's another nail in your coffin, lad," shouted RSM Hart.

"Fat-gutted useless pisspot," raged Hawthorne.

RSM Hart turned his back on him and stared at Matthews. "Get him to the hospital," he said, "and be quick about it." Two men picked up Matthews and carried him away.

"I did it, me!" shouted Hawthorne as he watched the men struggling up the steps.

"I know," shouted RSM Hart. "I know you did. You've confessed and you'll drop. You'll drop and I am holding every man here," he added as he turned in a circle and glared at each man in turn. "You're all guilty. Stand by, would you, and see an NCO kicked to death, eh? Right! You Cameron, you Lynch, Taylor, Edwards, Jackson, and you Hawthorne; all guilty. I've seen muck in my time, Micks straight out of the bog, Jocks straight out of the boozers, but I've not set eyes on rubbish like you before. Where's O'Neill?"

"He's gone on a cheap day excursion, old sportsman," said Taylor pleasantly.

"Escape from custody, would he? Right, make interesting reading on his charge sheet." Taylor laughed and RSM Hart swung round and stared at him. "What's the joke?"

Taylor, still chuckling, said: "You can't put him on a charge. You'd be wasting your time."

"Interesting," said Hart. "Let's hear some more."

"O'Neill's stark raving mad," said Taylor cheerfully.

"That goes for the lot of you," replied Hart as he moved towards the steps and glanced up them, then turned to Taylor. "There's an armed guard up there, so I advise you to stay put. Tomorrow the lot of you are being returned to Cairo!"

Wild cheers greeted this remark.

"Don't drop me in it," pleaded Sergeant Wilks as Taylor opened his kit-bag and took out a bottle of whisky and gazed at it fondly. "Mike, lay off the booze until we get out of here."

"Shut your gate," said Edwards.

"Mike, we'll be out of here in a couple of hours and on our way to Cairo. You can wait a couple of hours, can't you, Mike?"

Taylor held out a hand that was shaking badly and said: "I need a livener, sportsman."

"I know you," yelled Sergeant Wilks. "Once you start you can't stop."

"I need it, you silly little man," said Taylor. "All my darling little nerves are jumping." He unstopped the bottle.

"We'll never make Cairo," shouted Wilks. "This piss-up artist is going to put the kibosh on it."

Taylor lifted the bottle to his lips and drank greedily. "You could have worse than me looking after your welfare," protested Wilks. "You can have a drink on the way and when we reach Mersa Matruh there's the train journey and I don't mind you having a skinful then."

As Taylor lifted the bottle to his lips again, Cameron snatched it out of his hand. Taylor made an ineffectual grab at it but Cameron pushed him away. The smile left Taylor's lips and his eyes pleaded.

"Don't do that, sportsman. Don't play silly buggers." His skin felt dry and his nerves were jumping badly and he could feel his heart pounding. The twitching nerves, his restless fingers and the pounding of his heart made him sick and afraid. Only booze could damp down his inner fears. A few whiskies and his nerves would stop jumping and he would no longer be aware of his heart pounding. Every waking morning, he listened to his too-fast heart beats and twitched as his nerves jumped, swallowed hard as the nausea clawed at his stomach and the bile moved upwards to his lips, and he was consumed with the fear that he would die an early death; but a few drinks soon calmed his nerves and slowed down his heart, or so it seemed, and the fear left him and he was his old self again. He shivered as a pain hit him in the guts and he felt his body shaking while salt tears filled his eyes. "Jock," he said, as he tried hard to switch on a charming smile but only managed to distort his lips into a wolfish grin, "I need it."

Edwards smashed a bottle against the wall and held the jagged

edges towards Cameron, crouching a little with an ugly smile on his lips. "Give it back," he said, "the poor bastard needs it."

"I know," said Cameron as he half filled a tin mug with whisky, keeping his eye on the broken bottle held in Edwards' hand all the time. "And he'll have a drink. Enough to stop the shakes and the bloody pink elephants visiting him; but we want him on his feet when Black wishes us bon voyage, don't we?"

Taylor snatched the tin mug out of Cameron's hand, took a long greedy drink and sighed with relief and waited for the glow, knowing that soon his nerves would stop jumping and that he would be unaware of his pounding heartbeats and the nausea would lift. He smiled and drank again, but more slowly this time and smiled again as the pain in his guts began to ease and his lips and facial muscles relaxed. He wiped the back of his hand over his watery eyes and downed the rest of the whisky and felt considerably better. "Another one like that, sportsman, should do the trick," he said and felt much happier because the pain in his guts was only a dull throb now and his body was coming under control again. Cameron nodded and half filled the tin mug, then turned and looked at O'Neill who was pawing at his arm and holding out his tin mug like a blind beggar.

"Aye, I'd better give you your medicine as well," he said as he topped up O'Neill's mug then corked the bottle and dropped it into Taylor's kit-bag.

"Don't put it away, old sport," said Taylor. "I feel a thirst coming on."

"Wilko's not a bad fella," said Cameron, nodding to Sergeant Wilks. "If we lose him we might be landed with a real bastard."

Taylor nodded his head and sat down holding his tin mug lovingly in his hands.

Sergeant Wilks sighed with relief. He was eager to see Cairo again and had been delighted when Captain Black appointed him sergeant in charge of the prisoners' escort. With any luck he might wangle himself a base job, but first things first. He must see to it that the prisoners were clean, freshly shaved and smartly turned out, and above all, sober, when Captain Black inspected them.

6

"You don't have to march," said Sergeant Wilks agreeably as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and motioned to the prisoners' escort to do the same. "Don't want to make a public exhibition of you, do we?" He had had a few drinks on the train and was in a cheerful mood. The journey wasn't too bad considering, he thought. O'Neill had been a bit of a handful of course; pissed out of his mind as always. Why the hell he had to insist on sticking his bare arse out of the window at every small wayside station was anybody's guess. Nice way to carry on. Still, it had discouraged the wogs from entering the carriage. They had preferred to squat on the roof with their market produce and hope for the best, sooner than share a carriage with Paddy O'Neill, and they weren't bad bloody judges, thought Wilks. If I hadn't been prisoners' escort, I'd sooner have chanced the roof than that drunken bastard's company. Still, apart from O'Neill, the journey from Mersa Matruh hadn't been too bad and they'd had the carriage to themselves and the prisoners, with the exception of O'Neill, of course, were reasonably sober and didn't give any trouble.

Taylor had had a skinful, of course, but it didn't show. You

could sink a battleship before you could sink him. Once he got over his early morning shakes he could drink all day and you wouldn't think a drop had passed his lips. Glad I had Jock Cameron with me, reflected Sergeant Wilks. He helped to keep them in order. He smiled at Cameron: "Nobody need know you're a bloody prisoner, Jock."

"You're a good fella, Wilko," said Cameron.

"Well," chuckled Wilks, "all this playing soldiers, I mean it's not us, is it? I mean we're NAAFI wallahs." He stopped in his tracks. "Hey, see those tarts? Almost forgot what they looked like."

The group came to a halt outside Cairo station and stared with mounting interest at the Greek, French, Italian, Maltese and Egyptian girls. They ranged in colour from a healthy light brown to creamy white; jet black hair to light copper. Large breasts bounced as they walked and the men groaned aloud as they shivered with desire. Three girls walked past and did not even glance their way. Young and dark and plump, and to sex-starved men very desirable. A dozen pairs of greedy eyes turned and concentrated on their swaying buttocks. Then a tall slim girl with copper hair, long legs and small firm breasts passed by. Jackson riveted all his attention on her and savagely dug his hands into his trouser pockets. She could send me mad any time she liked, he thought. Just her and me and buckets of champagne locked in a bedroom for about a week. Christ, her little wagging bum's sending me mad, so how would I feel if I came face to face with her.

"What about a drink?" enquired Taylor.

"Now, Mike," cautioned Sergeant Wilks.

"What's wrong with having a drink and a meal, sportsman, before they clap us in irons?" said Taylor.

The rest of the prisoners hastily agreed.

"Now look, lads," protested Sergeant Wilks, "I'm supposed to hand you lot in."

Paddy O'Neill hadn't noticed the girls or the trams clanging by, or the bright sunshine, or the Arab men walking hand in hand like lovers, or the shouting gesturing Egyptians, or the street smells,

or the old crones seated on the pavement edge clutching wizened babies to their breasts, or the street traders, or the people from many nations seated at tables outside the cafés in the bright sunshine sipping coffee or mint tea, but he had noticed the nearest bar and had noted that the door was open. He walked towards it.

"O'Neill," shouted Sergeant Wilks.

O'Neill walked on, his eyes blank and expressionless. His puce-coloured tongue curled out of his mouth and licked his dry lips.

"Paddy, come back," pleaded Wilks.

O'Neill entered the café, walked to the bar, seated himself on a stool and said: "Give us some of the hard stuff, fella, and a pint of beer. I've a terrible thirst on me."

"Paddy," howled Sergeant Wilks again, his voice hitting the lowest note of despair.

"Hopeless, sportsman," said Taylor. "Paddy's never deliberately walked past a bar in his life, but I'll see if I can return him to the fold." He headed towards the café.

"Mike," yelled Wilks, then realised that he was wasting his time as all the other prisoners walked purposefully towards the café. "Come on," he said to the prisoners' escort and followed the prisoners into the bar.

An hour later Sergeant Wilks was still saying bitterly, "I've treated you well but you lot are gonna drop me in it, aren't you." The prisoners were still protesting, "Drop you in it, Wilko? Think we'd drop you in it? You're one of the best, Wilko. What you having this time, Wilko? . . ." "Short of a few quid, Wilko? . . ." "Look, we'll get back. Don't think we're gonna take off, do you? Don't think we'd do that, do you? I mean, what do you think we are? Rotten bastards? We wouldn't do that, Wilko . . ." "Your shout, Jock, and don't forget old Wilko and his lads. They're doing a great job."

O'Neill sang Mother Macree, When Irish Eyes are Smiling, I Met Her in the Garden Where the Praties Grow, and a splendid rebel song: God's Curse on youse English! That went down very well with the prisoners but deeply offended Sergeant Wilks, but

when Paddy repeated it an hour later, 'Sergeant Wilks' applauded delightedly as well.

The prisoners' kit and the prisoners' escort's kit stood neglected in a corner of the café and three Arab boys walked in, picked up the rifles and ran out. No one noticed this except Jackson who didn't bother to mention it.

An hour later Sergeant Wilks was mumbling thickly: "Ought to be getting back." They were seated at a long table and the waiter had cleared away the remains of the food. Many empty glasses and even more full ones stood on the table. "Ought to be getting back," mumbled Sergeant Wilks again.

"The Pale Moon was Rising," howled O'Neill.

"Her legs," said Jackson, who couldn't get the copper-haired girl out of his mind. "Longest legs I've seen in years. They went right up to her bum."

"The Scrubs is better than the bleedin' Ville," said Edwards, "and the Ville's better than the Moor, but the only bleedin' nick worth a light is Holloway; only they won't let me in there, the bastards."

"Ought to be getting back," mumbled Sergeant Wilks, but he didn't protest when Jackson ordered another round.

"His old man's a hangman," said Edwards nodding to Taylor. "The old bastard's a hangman, ain't he, Mike?"

Taylor smiled charmingly. "Not officially, sportsman. He's only a judge."

Edwards looked angry. "He's bloody arguing," he shouted, "about a bloody technicality. How many's the old bastard topped? Twenty? Thirty? How bloody many?"

Taylor gave this some thought. "Really don't know. I never took much interest in the family business."

O'Neill stopped singing. "Me darlin' wife," he said to everyone's amazement, then paused and stared into his full glass and everyone waited expectantly. In all the years they had known him, he had never even mentioned his cat, let alone his wife. "The darlin' girl took off with a fella working with a travelling circus

and me ould mother was delighted to have me back, so she was . . . I kiss your dear fingers so toil worn for me," he howled.

"We've eaten," said Lynch, standing and swaying slightly, "and we've had a good drink. Now, what about a bunk up?"

Cameron pushed him back into his seat.

Half an hour later Sergeant Wilks was seated on the lavatory and the small room swayed before his eyes as he repeated time and time again out loud: "Pull myself together. Gotta hand them in."

In the next cubicle, Cameron opened a large buff envelope and examined the contents critically. "The only thing we've not been charged with is murder," he said finally to Jackson.

"Pull myself together. Gotta hand them in," moaned Wilks from the next cubicle.

Cameron tore the envelope and the contents into tiny pieces and the prisoners' crimes were flushed down the toilet.

"How much time will that give us?" enquired Jackson.

"You never know your luck. Maybe weeks or months before Black gets out of Tobruk."

"He may never get out, Jock."

"That's wishful thinking," said Cameron as he pushed past Jackson.

"Old Wilko will have something to say when he sobers up tomorrow, Jock."

Cameron smiled. "No prisoners' crime sheets and dead drunk when he hands us in. He'll listen to reason seeing he's as deep in it as we are now."

"And no rifles," said Jackson.

"What's that?"

"The wogs pinched the rifles."

"Did you see it?" enquired Cameron.

"Of course I did."

"You might have bloody stopped them," said Cameron indignantly.

"I didn't want to break up the party, Jock."

"The wee woggies will sell the bloody guns to the enemy. Johnnie, what the hell were you thinking about?"

Jackson thought for a moment. "You know who our real enemy is, don't you," he said solemnly. "Our blokes. The politicians, the useless bloody generals and lunatics like Black. If anyone is going to get us knocked off it's those bastards. Did you ever think of that?"

Cameron shook his head. "You're pure bloody daft. I don't know why I waste breath on you." He moved towards the door.

"Pull yourself together. Gotta hand them in," moaned Sergeant Wilks from his little cubicle.

"What about old Wilko?" enquired Jackson.

"Och, he's fine where he is for the while. Leave him," said Cameron as he walked back into the bar.

Two taxis pulled up outside the NAAFI billet. Cameron and Jackson climbed out of the first taxi and did not even bother to haggle about the fare. As Cameron paid the driver with a lordly air, Jackson helped out the drunken Sergeant Wilks and led him towards the gates. Robbo and Nick, the prisoners' escort, both fell out of the second taxi. The prisoners picked them up and dusted them down, then steadied them and supported them through the gates, heading towards the steps that led to the billet. Sergeant Wilks suddenly came to a staggering halt and pushed Jackson away from him when he saw Sergeant-Major Dodds standing on the steps.

"Evening," said Sergeant-Major Dodds pleasantly.

Sergeant Wilks made a gallant effort to pull himself together. "Ser . . . Sergeant Wil . . . Wil . . . Wilks," he said thickly, "with es-escort, reporting with prisoners." He staggered and almost fell over.

Sergeant-Major Dodds stared at him. "Very educational. What the bleedin' hell are you talking about?"

Sergeant Wilks made another determined effort to clear up the mystery. "Re . . . reporting with prisoners . . . sir, handing over . . . your custody, sir."

Dodds stared at the men. "Who's the prisoners?"

"Ah," said Wilks waving his arms until he maintained balance again. "Thought . . . thought you'd ask that." He waved his arms again. "This shower."

"All of them?" enquired Sergeant-Major Dodds in a loud voice. "All the bloody lot of them?"

Wilks shook his head violently. Put him straight, he thought. Poor old Dodds. Not a bad old lad. Understanding fella . . . sooner do you a good turn . . . not like some . . . Not a bad old lad, one of us, but gotta put him straight . . . Mustn't make a balls up . . . If I don't put him straight now, never get it straight. He staggered over to the first drunken prisoners' escort. "Not him," he said as he put his arms affectionately around the escort's shoulders. "Not ole Robbo. He's bloody prisoners' es-escort. Good ole Robbo." He flapped his free arm in the general direction of the second prisoners' escort. "Not him. Not ole Nick . . . Escort."

"They're both pissed," said Dodds. "And you're pissed. Nice turn up for the books. Bloody escorts pissed and bloody prisoners sober."

"Not O'Neill," Wilks turned and glared at O'Neill. "Not bloody Paddy. He's pissed too."

"He's always pissed," said Dodds.

"All pissed," said Wilks as he glared at the prisoners. "Should be . . . had . . . had a skinful."

"Escort pissed," said Dodds. "Prisoners pissed. You've made my day for me. See you've got your kit anyway."

"Got our kit," agreed Wilks.

"Where's your rifles?"

Wilks turned in a complete circle as he searched for the missing rifles. "Funny. Had 'em. Robbo, ole son, where's bloody rifles?"

"Dunno. Don't ask me, sarge."

"Funny," Wilks squinted up at Sergeant-Major Dodds. "Had 'em . . . Funny that."

"Lost them have you? Lost your rifles?"

"Missing," agreed Wilks.

"Serious that, losing your rifles. That's serious."

"Aw . . . turn up," said Wilks trying to sound optimistic.

Dodds held out his hand. "Let's have the prisoners' documents."

Sergeant Wilks searched through his pockets then turned. "Robbo, ole son?"

"Ain't got 'em, sarge. Don't look at me. Ain't got 'em. You've got 'em."

"Funny," said Wilks still searching through his pockets. "Had em. Now I ain't got 'em. Bloody funny."

"I'm killing myself laughing," shouted Sergeant-Major Dodds. "Sergeant Cameron."

"Sir," Cameron stepped smartly forward and stamped to attention.

"March this shower inside then report to me in my office." Dodds turned on his heels and walked into the billet.

Cameron looked at the steps leading to the billet, then looked at Wilks, Robbo and Nick. "They'd need wings on their heels to bloody well get up there, so carry them in and bed them down."

Sergeant-Major Dodds poured out two drinks, handed a glass to Cameron, then settled back in his chair.

"Cheers," said Cameron. "I needed this."

"You've been on the piss all day, Jock. Think I don't know when the train got in at 1100 hours this morning?"

"It's a good whisky, this one, Ted."

Dodds leaned forward. "Got the sergeant and the escort pissed, eh?"

"Who, me?" Cameron somehow managed to look outraged at this suggestion.

"Where's the documents?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about, Ted."

"Aw, come off it." Dodds emptied his glass and looked Cameron straight between the eyes. "You don't think you're gonna get away with this, do you?"

"Me? I'm no' trying to get away with anything."

"What are you charged with, Jock?"

Cameron picked up his glass and smiled. "Far as I know I'm not on a charge. I'm in transit and waiting to be posted."

Dodds looked thoughtful. "None of you lot are getting posted. I'm holding on to you until I get the full score."

Cameron shook his head. "You can't hold us, Ted."

"Can't I?" grinned Dodds.

"Och. Give over. What are we charged with? What's our crimes?"

"Why were you sent back under escort, Jock?"

"Surplus to requirements." Cameron placed his empty glass on the table. "How the hell would I know? Who says we're prisoners and that we were under escort anyway?"

"Wilko will when he comes to. He'll give me all the gen."

"Tell you he's the prisoners' escort and the bloody prisoners had to carry him here, you mean?"

"He's already told me that."

"The ravings of a drunken man. I fancy he'll have second thoughts in the morning."

Dodds poured two more drinks. "I know you've dropped him deep in it, you bastard, but you're not dropping me in it, Jock."

"Maybe we'll find an answer agreeable to us both," said Cameron with a smile.

"Oh yeah? I shut my eyes, you mean? Pretend I'm daft and I don't know what's going on? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Cameron leaned forward. "If Wilks forgets to mention that he escorted prisoners back to HQ, how does that affect you, Ted? You're not a bloody mind reader, are you?"

Dodds shook his head. "If Wilko and the escort don't return, someone's going to wonder what happened to them."

"Haven't you heard?" said Cameron. "There's a bloody great full-scale retreat on. Even the generals don't know what day it is. The chances are that Black's already locked up in Tobruk with no hope of getting out, so who's going to worry about Wilko and his escort?"

Sergeant-Major Dodds sat deep in thought, then glanced at Cameron. "Tobruk's fallen."

"That's terrible." Cameron shook his head sadly.

"The South Africans didn't put up any resistance. They bloody packed it in, Jock."

"They were moving in as we were being sent out," said Cameron. "Maybe Jackson knew what he was talking about." He looked thoughtful, then a smile touched his lips. "It's reasonable to suppose that Black's a prisoner."

"Maybe he got out, Jock."

"That's a chance we'll have to take, Ted." Cameron smiled again. "Maybe the poor bastard's dead."

"It's an even money bet," said Dodds. "But why should I stick my chin out for you?"

Cameron nodded his head then slowly counted ten pounds and placed the notes on the table.

"Try and bribe me, would you, you Scottish nit?"

"You've a poor memory, Ted. I owe you ten quid, remember?"

Dodds stared at the money then leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips. He slowly nodded his head. "I remember, but you owe me a bloody sight more than ten quid. Keep counting."

"You're a hard bastard," said Cameron as he threw a five pound note on to the table.

"I'll tell you when to stop," said Dodds.

"Twenty quid. That's all I'm prepared to pay," said Cameron.

Dodds smiled. "There's Wilko and his escort—three—you, Taylor, Edwards, Jackson, seven—Hawthorne and O'Neill..."

"Hawthorne and O'Neill are broke."

Dodds dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "And Lynch. That's ten. At five quid a head, how much is that?"

"That's fifty quid!" screamed Cameron.

"Keep counting," said Dodds. "It's a cheap price to pay for freedom."

"Thirty... forty... fifty," snarled Cameron, throwing the money on the table.

Dodds scooped up the money. "OK. You're in transit."

"You'll have to do more than that," Cameron tossed back his drink. "The next move is to have a word with Wilko. Let him

know he's committed a heinous crime and his only hope is to keep his big trap shut, and you make sure he doesn't get posted back to the desert."

"Syria," said Dodds thoughtfully. "They're posting men to Syria."

"I wouldn't mind that myself," said Cameron. "After about a month's leave."

"Cost you," said Dodds. "It's reckoned to be the next stop before Paradise."

"You've cost me enough. Just make bloody sure none of us get posted back to the desert or maybe you'll be deep in it as well."

"OK." Dodds nodded in agreement. "Tell Taylor and Edwards to look in for a drink; they may like a posting to Syria. Pack Paddy O'Neill's kit for him; he's on the first draft out and I don't bloody care where it's going." He consulted a list. "Poor bastard. He'll be in Aden in a few days."

"I've never been there," said Cameron, "but they say it's the arse hole of the Middle East."

"It's a bloody terrible place," agreed Dodds. "But old Paddy can't stay here, he'd balls up everything. Anyway, he never knows where he is."

"Well, it can't be worse than Tobruk," said Cameron.

"You joking?" Dodds refilled the glasses. "I'm telling you, Aden's a sweat box. Men get dehydrated just leaving the billet for a piss."

"Not Paddy," said Cameron. "Even if he sat on the bloody sun, it wouldn't dry him out."

Sergeant Wilks turned over on his bed, grunted and opened his eyes. "Pull meself together. Gotta hand them in," he groaned. The bed tipped at an angle of forty-five degrees and the room swayed. He gulped as he stared at the ceiling and the bed slowly settled on an even keel again. Thank God for that, he thought, and hurriedly closed his eyes. Soon he was in a deep sleep. Near him the prisoners' escort snored horribly. The prisoners squatted on the floor playing

poker. Cameron walked in and they stopped playing, waiting expectantly. "The price of freedom's fifty quid," he said. "So give."

"I'm broke," said Hawthorne, the only honest man in the room.

"So's O'Neill if I know him," said Cameron. "So the rest of you had better make it up. Roll Wilko and the escort for a start."

"Cheap at the price, old sport," said Taylor. "Throw it in the hat, chaps."

"Where's O'Neill?" enquired Cameron.

"In the nearest boozer," said Edwards.

"And Jackson and Lynch?"

Taylor nodded to the window. "They left in a hurry," he said.

"The daft bastards," said Cameron. "What the hell did they want to do that for?"

7

Jackson placed the bottle of brandy on the table then pulled the half-naked girl towards him and kissed her. She laughed and placed her arms about his neck.

"You like me, Mister Good Looking?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, darling," said Jackson as he kissed her on the nose then disengaged himself and moved away. "Now, let's sit down and have a drink."

"Drink. Let's have a drink," mocked the girl. "That's all you soldiers can do. Drink."

"What's the hurry?" Jackson sat at the table. It's no good, he thought. I can't see myself going through with this. That girl at the station now. What a little darling she was. He couldn't get the copper-haired girl out of his mind. The street traders' voices floated into the room through the open window as Jackson stood up and took off his battle-dress blouse. It was warm in the room and the half-naked girl standing beside him used cheap perfume. This isn't the way it should be, thought Jackson as he glanced at the girl's naked breasts, then turned his head away. If I'm going to do it I'll have to be drunk.

"You like long time, darling?" enquired the girl.

Jackson winced, then switched on a smile. "I'd like about a week, my old lovely."

The girl laughed. "Bloody liar. You soldiers no good for love. You soldiers only good for drink." She laughed again and made a rude gesture. "Ten seconds. All over. Finish. Hello. Goodbye."

"I'm out of practice," agreed Jackson. "But I'm going back into strict training. Terry, pour the drinks."

"You have to be drunk before you make love?" pouted the girl.

Jackson turned his head and stared at her naked breasts then downwards to her tight fitting panties. She's got a bloody good figure, he thought. If I'd met her in a bar and we'd had a few drinks and a chat, and I'd got to know something about her . . . I suppose it's crazy, but I can't just walk into a room and buy a whore. He shook his head and thought, right now, darling, I can't take you on in cold blood; drunk I might be able to do. "Pour the drinks, Terry," he repeated.

"OK." Lynch moved away from his girl and poured the drinks.

"Give the girls a drink," said Jackson, staring at the girl's breasts and thinking, I'm always dead keen to get their clothes off, but tits look a lot more interesting under a tight fitting sweater. "You do drink, don't you?" he enquired politely.

The girl laughed. "I can do everything, darling."

"Good," said Jackson. That may help, he thought. If we have a little drink and a little chat, or something. It's no good. I can't just wander into any bloody stranger's room and start screwing her. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Lena, darling."

Lena, thought Jackson. What a giggle. Wonder where she comes from. She's not bad looking and I like the way they bounce when she moves. A few drinks and with any luck she might even look beautiful. He wondered how she had started on the game. "You happy with your girl, Terry?"

Lynch looked at his girl. "No."

"You no good," Lynch's girl looked sulky.

"Me very good," said Lynch. "Me very good at the old jig-a-jig."

"Me very good," said the girl. "Everybody say me very good."

What a recommendation, thought Jackson. Everybody say she's very good. The English, the French, Poles, Yanks, Springboks, Aussies, Kiwis, Gyppos, Darkies, and Chinese sailors. I'm right off her. "She should be, Terry," he said. "She earns her living at it."

"Don't like her eyes," said Lynch.

"He says bad things," shouted the girl.

"Her eyes?" said Jackson. "What's wrong with her eyes?"

Lynch looked at the girl then turned away. "Don't know. I just don't go for them."

"They should be the least of your worries," said Jackson. "Drink up." He handed a drink to Lena and wondered how many men she had had that day.

"Don't like this man," sulked the girl as she picked up her glass and turned two hostile eyes on Lynch. "He says bad things."

"They aren't getting on too well," Jackson clinked his glass against Lena's. "Maybe they weren't matched in heaven."

"What he say?" demanded Lynch's girl. "He say bad things, now?"

"He says you've very nice and very pretty," said Lena, trying to calm the girl down.

"Him very nice. Him Mister Good Looking." The girl smiled at Jackson then she spoke to Lena in Arabic and they both laughed.

"What did she say?" enquired Jackson.

Lena laughed again. "She say that maybe you are very good for long time."

Jackson and Lynch burst out laughing. It's funny, thought Jackson, but I didn't think they were interested. Pay up and get out and they don't usually waste time drinking with the customers. He turned his head but was aware that Lena was watching him intently and smiling to herself.

"I am madam," said Lena. "I own this house and four girls work for me."

"So you don't sleep?"

Lena sat down and leaned forward and smiled into Jackson's eyes. "Only when I like, and you I like."

Jackson stared at her. She's lying, he thought, but maybe I've struck lucky this time. Maybe she wants to give me a real ride.

"Terry," he said, "I don't think they're bad kids."

Lena opened her handbag. "You like chewing gum?"

Jackson looked at the grey green stick that she held in her hand and shook his head. "No."

"Very good Egyptian chewing gum." Lena bit her even white teeth into the stick and chewed, then held the stick an inch away from Jackson's lips. "You try. It's very good."

Jackson bit into the stick and chewed. It had a faintly muddy flavour and it was rather like chewing plasticine.

"You have chewing gum?" Lena held it out to Lynch who glanced at Jackson.

"It's OK," said Jackson.

"What is it?" enquired Lynch.

"Chewing gum."

Lynch bit into the stick and chewed. "Funny taste. It's not spearmint, I know that much."

"She uses it," said Jackson. "So it can't be poison."

"What's your name?" enquired Lynch as he turned and glanced at his girl.

"Fatima," said the girl.

"Suits you," said Lynch as he stared at her large breasts.

"What he say now?" shouted Fatima.

"I can't say anything to her," complained Lynch. "Every time I open my trap she flies off the handle."

"You say bad things all the time," sulked Fatima.

"She's not bad." Lynch turned to Jackson. "Think I'm getting used to her."

"Me very good. Very good." Fatima thrust out her large breasts and preened herself.

"On the fat side," said Lynch. "Still . . ."

"Fat? You no like fat? You like skinny? You want girl look like boy?" Fatima was shouting again.

"Do pack it in," yawned Lynch. "You don't have to keep shouting."

Lena spoke to Fatima in Arabic and Fatima shouted: "Men like skinny girl no good."

"Doesn't she go on?" said Lynch to Jackson. Every moment he was becoming more and more interested in Fatima. He pulled her on to his lap and explored her body with his hands, but she knocked his hands away.

"You say the wrong things," said Lena. "You be careful, soldier."

"What did I say?" Lynch topped up his glass.

"You say you like skinny girl. That's no good."

"Who did?" said Lynch indignantly.

"Men who like skinny girls no good," said Lena. "We know." Jackson threw back his head and laughed and Lena smiled at him. "You understand. You very intelligent."

"Terry," Jackson still laughing nodded to Lynch, "he likes little boys."

Fatima jumped off Lynch's lap like a scalded cat. "He's bad man," she shouted. "This one no good."

Lynch started laughing, suddenly he felt very drunk. Fatima, the room, the drinks on the table, the noises that floated into the room from the street below. The two half-naked girls. The situation he was in. Everything seemed very funny to him. "She's gorgeous," he spluttered. "I'm mad about her. Tell her to stop shouting." He picked up his glass and drank, then spurted brandy all over the table as he was convulsed with laughter again.

"They joke," laughed Lena. "This soldier like you very much."

Lynch stood up and knocked his chair over and grabbed Fatima and kissed her. He wasn't laughing any more. He kissed her again and Fatima struggled then suddenly stopped resisting.

"We'll go somewhere," Lynch was breathing heavily. "Come on. I want to go somewhere."

"You like me?" Fatima pushed her body against Lynch and leaned back and looked into his eyes.

"You're great," breathed Lynch. "You're lovely. Come on. Let's go somewhere."

Fatima bounced her belly against him. "What you like soldier? You tell me."

"You're lovely," groaned Lynch, "you're a dish. Come on. Let's go somewhere."

"You like skinny?"

"No," groaned Lynch. "No."

"You like? What you like, eh?"

"Fat," moaned Lynch as he pushed his face into her heavy breasts. "Fat, I like 'em fat. Come on." He pulled Fatima towards the door and Fatima went with him with a smile on her lips.

Jackson picked up his glass and drank and looked at Lena. She's attractive, he thought. What a figure. He was faintly surprised that he had finally reached this conclusion. I suppose I'm drunk, he thought as he replaced his empty glass on the table, but who the hell cares. She's beautiful. He savagely pulled her to him and ran his hands down her naked back and gripped her buttocks, hard. "You're beautiful," he said. "Beautiful."

Lena smiled and kissed him. "You I like. So good looking."

"I can't wait," said Jackson. "I've got to have you."

Lena, still smiling, moved towards the bed.

"No, please," moaned Fatima.

"Shut up," said Lynch. "Don't keep yapping. Just shut up. You're lovely. You're lovely."

"You no good," groaned Fatima. "You very bad man."

"You're lovely," said Lynch. "But don't keep yapping. Don't talk all the time."

"You bad . . . bad man."

"You heard me," shouted Lynch. "I said shut up. Why do you keep bloody talking? Just move. Come on, move. Start again."

"No—no—please. No, please. No."

"Lovely," breathed Lynch. "Nice and slow. Lovely. Move, darling, move. Lovely . . . You're gorgeous, fatty. Gorgeous. You're the best. Go a bit faster. Oh, oh, you're bloody gorgeous. You're the best."

"You're lovely," moaned Fatima. "Oh, you very lovely man."

When does it end? groaned Jackson under his breath. It's got to end, he thought as he plunged down at the body beneath him savagely. It goes on and on and bloody on and never ends. I'm going crazy. It never ends. There's no ending. It's beautiful and she's beautiful but it's got to end or I'll go crazy. How long have I been with her. An hour? Two hours? What's the time? Who cares how long I've been here, but it's got to bloody bloody end soon or I'll go crazy. He plunged downwards savagely time and time again and smiled as Lena started groaning again. God, thought Jackson, I still can't end it and I must . . . must . . . must. This is absolute bloody hell. I'm going mad. Make her say it again, maybe that will do it. "Say it," he shouted. "Go on, say it, say the words."

Lena mumbled the words he wanted to hear then bit him savagely on the shoulder and repeated the words again and again.

There's no ending, thought Jackson savagely. What the hell's the matter. It's got to end. Why doesn't it?

The door burst open and Lynch swayed into the room wearing only his shirt, socks and boots. "That one's passed out," he shouted. "Get me another one. That bitch has passed out."

Lena laughed and violently pushed Jackson away and got up from under him and walked to the door. "I get you another girl," she said.

"Come back," shouted Jackson. "Lena. Come back."

Lena laughed again and walked into the corridor with Lynch.

"Come back," pleaded Jackson. "Come back, my darling." The door closed violently as Lynch kicked it. I'm going out of my bloody mind, thought Jackson. What the hell's happened? I'm going crazy.

"I feel marvellous," laughed Jackson as he pushed his plate away and poured two glasses of champagne.

"I feel great," said Lynch. "Great. Not a bad old dump this, is it?"

They were seated at a table on the balcony and could see the bar below and the cabaret girls seated on the bar stools.

"What about them?" said Lynch looking at the girls.

"Not bad," Jackson agreed. "Look at that little darling on the first stool."

Lynch leaned forward and stared at the girl. "I'll have that one."

"Toss you," said Jackson as he produced a coin.

"Heads."

"You lose." Jackson returned the coin to his pocket.

Who cares, thought Lynch. They're all gorgeous. I've never seen so many top quality screws collected in one place in my life.

"Johnnie," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Great. Just great."

"I feel great, Johnnie."

"Never felt better," said Jackson. "I feel just great. Cheers." He raised his glass carelessly and spilt champagne on to the table cloth. "What about another bottle?" He raised his arm and called out to the waiter. "More champagne, Abdul."

The waiter hurried over and smiled. "Yessir. More champagne. Yessir," and removed the champagne bucket from the table and walked away.

The girl seated at the bar glanced towards the balcony and Jackson waved to her and called out: "Come and join us, darling."

An officer walking towards the bar stopped and frowned as he glanced towards the bar then turned to the owner of the cabaret and said: "I don't understand why you allow other ranks to use this place, madam."

Madam smiled. "If they have money to spend they are welcome, captain."

"Officers will stop using this place. I suppose you understand that."

Madam smiled again. "There are more soldiers than officers," she said as she walked away.

The officer frowned then continued on his way towards the bar.

The girl turned on her bar stool to see Jackson better. She was smiling, then suddenly she stopped smiling and turned her back on Jackson as she realised that he was not an officer.

The waiter returned to the table with a bottle of champagne and as he uncorked the bottle the girl glanced towards the balcony again. Jackson smiled. He felt light-headed but his mind was crystal clear and he was convinced that he could almost read her thoughts. "She went off us, Terry, when she caught on we weren't officers."

"You know what she can do then," said Lynch.

Jackson laughed and turned to the waiter. "That girl there." He pointed to the girl on the bar stool. "Ask her if she would like a bottle of champagne." The waiter hesitated and Jackson knew what was worrying him so he opened his bulging wallet and carelessly threw a ten pound note on to the table. The waiter smiled and hurried down the stairs. Jackson picked up his glass and winked at Lynch. He knew that as soon as the waiter spoke to the girl she would come running.

Lynch asked Jackson once again. "How do you feel, Johnnie?"

"Great. I feel bloody marvellous."

"No." Lynch looked puzzled. "I mean how do you feel?"

"Yes," said Jackson. "Now you mention it, I feel damn funny."

"Me too," agreed Lynch.

"Chewing gum," said Jackson and started laughing.

"Yeah. Chewing gum." Lynch nodded his head. "But what was it?"

"God knows. Damn funny chewing gum."

"I was nearly going crazy, Johnnie."

"I was crazy," laughed Jackson.

"Still?" enquired Lynch.

Jackson stopped laughing. "Yes."

"Did you finish?"

"No," said Jackson. "That's why I was crazy."

"I knocked off three girls, Johnnie, and didn't finish." A delighted grin spread across Lynch's face. "Do you know what?" He swept his hand carelessly towards the dozen or so cabaret girls

seated at the long bar. "I reckon I could go through that lot like a dose of salts."

"You start at one end and I'll start at the other," grinned Jackson, "and I'll meet you in the middle."

Lynch laughed, then turning his head said: "The waiter's speaking to her and beckoning to another girl at one of the tables. You can have her. I'll have the one on the stool."

Jackson shook his head. "You lost the toss."

"I'm still having her."

"You'll be lucky."

"Look at the other one. What a dish," Lynch craned forward to see better. "I've changed my mind. She's the one for me."

"What's the matter with you. Got a power complex or something, Terry?"

"I'm irresistible," grinned Lynch. "Nothing can stop me now and don't forget we put these two girls in the picture right from the start. I'm not wasting my time."

"They'll know our intentions as soon as they look at us," said Jackson. "Here they come, and don't forget to get on your feet and try to kid them that you're a gentleman." He slowly stood up and waited for the girls. But the last thing a woman wants is a gentleman, thought Jackson. He was convinced that at long last he knew exactly how to handle women and this came to him as something of a revelation. I can have any girl I want, he thought. I know every trick in the book and it's so damn simple once you know.

The girls stopped at the table and smiled.

"My friend Terry, and I'm Johnnie," Jackson turned to the waiter. "Two more glasses."

The girls sat at the table and the waiter returned with the glasses, and Jackson poured the drinks. "You're Greek, aren't you?" he said turning to the black-haired girl. He was convinced she was.

"How did you know?" The girl spoke almost faultless English.

The band struck up a popular tune and Lynch led his girl on to the dance floor.

"I don't know," Jackson shrugged and watched the girl place her glass carefully on the table. "I suppose you work here?"

The girl nodded her head and smiled.

"What's your name?"

"Sylvia."

That's not your name, thought Jackson. Not that it matters. She had large, beautiful green eyes. Jet black hair and thick eyebrows. Her eyebrows fascinated Jackson. "You get paid commission on the drinks, don't you?" he said.

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders. "Yes."

"That's why I ordered champagne."

"It's expensive."

"I know," said Jackson.

"Would you like to dance?" Sylvia glanced towards the dance floor.

"No. I want to sit and look at you."

Sylvia's lips twisted into a faint smile. "If you wish."

"Then we'll move on." Jackson waved his arm vaguely. "Somewhere else."

"I cannot leave. I must stay here."

"I know, you're paid to entertain the troops, but we'll move on soon. Have you had dinner?"

"I am not hungry, thank you."

"Later perhaps. You probably know a decent restaurant."

"I work here. You know I cannot leave."

"I've told you we'll be moving on soon."

"No." Sylvia shook her head.

"It's no good arguing," Jackson said.

Sylvia frowned. "I will decide."

Jackson smiled. "Of course. Would you like me to say please? Come with me, please. Please show me Cairo. Do you want me to beg you to be very kind to me?"

Sylvia stared at Jackson. "You are not English."

"I'm English."

"I see." She still looked faintly puzzled.

"How are they when they come out of the desert?" enquired Jackson pleasantly.

"Pardon? Who?"

"The officers."

"Oh. The officers." Sylvia smiled. "Very nice."

"Very shy," said Jackson. "Very eager to please. Very grateful."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's the desert," said Jackson. "It takes all the guts out of you. A year in the desert and when you come out and come face to face with a girl you're very shy."

"You have been to the desert?"

"Yes. Just got back."

"But you are not shy."

"No," said Jackson. "I hope you appreciate it."

Sylvia laughed. "How can I tell? I hardly know you."

"You will get to know me," said Jackson. "Do you know, you're the first girl I've spoken to in eighteen months."

"I think you lie."

"No." Jackson shook his head. "I've slept with a few but I haven't spoken to them. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Perhaps," said Sylvia as she lifted her glass and sipped it.

"You're different," Jackson thought for a moment. "At least, I hope you are."

"Oh. So I am different?" Sylvia's smile mocked him.

Jackson squinted at her over the rim of his glass. "Do you think we'll find anything to talk about?"

"I don't know. Is it important?"

"Yes," said Jackson.

Sylvia smiled and nodded her head in agreement.

"We'll dance." Jackson replaced his glass on the table and watched Lynch and his girl dancing. "And we'll drink champagne and go on the town and get to know each other."

"Will we?" Sylvia looked at Jackson. She was faintly puzzled and interested. He's very handsome and charming, she thought, and he has a wonderful smile, and he's different. Perhaps I am not very much different from other girls, but he is different from

other men I've met. He is a little crazy and so sure of himself. She decided that she liked him.

"It's important." Jackson took her hand and gazed at her fingers. "I've wasted eighteen months of my life in a desert, do you know that? In a bloody desert. We must all be crazy sitting around in a boiling hot stinking desert." He brooded on this for a few moments, then smiled: "And what are you doing wasting your life in this dump?" Sylvia picked up her glass with her free hand and smiled vaguely and shrugged her shoulders. "In a desert," continued Jackson with a perplexed look in his eyes. "Thousands of us. We must all be stark raving mad." Listening to the sound of his own voice he was suddenly convinced that every word he uttered was golden and should be treasured. If she doesn't catch on soon that I'm a blinding wonder, he thought, I'll just have to tell her to piss off. I can have any girl I want and I don't want this girl doubting anything I say. She's got to believe in me and she'd better start falling for me damn soon. I'm going to make love to her like she's never been made love to before. I'll go crazy in the process but I'll send her crazy too. He smiled at Sylvia and thought, she's got the most glorious eyebrows I've ever seen in my life. I'll probably forget her but I'll never forget her eyebrows, and the girl I marry will have to have eyebrows like her. Then the thought crossed his mind, I haven't seen her legs. I must check on her legs. Can't make love to a girl with fat legs. "Stand up, Sylvia," he said.

Sylvia looked surprised. "Please?"

"Stand up, darling."

"But why?"

"I want to look at you."

Sylvia stared at Jackson. This one is crazy, she thought. He is wild. I will not do what he orders. She placed her hand in front of her mouth and laughed, softly. But he is nicely crazy. She stood and moved away from the table and paused near the balcony railings and glanced down at the bar, then slowly turned and looked at Jackson with an enquiring smile.

"You're beautiful," said Jackson and held out his hand. Sylvia

walked back to the table and Jackson felt suddenly elated. This is the girl for me, he thought. She's beautiful and she knows I'm going to take her to bed and make love to her and send her crazy and afterwards we'll lie close together and talk. Boy, I'm really making contact with this one.

In the taxi Jackson locked his arms around Sylvia and whispered in her ear, and Sylvia laughed because everything that Jackson said to her was either very funny, tender, beautiful, or simply shattering. She turned her face towards him and they kissed and she snuggled closer to him. Kissing Jackson disturbed her very much but it also made her feel terribly happy and puzzled. In less than two hours she had fallen in love with a complete stranger.

Jackson debated with himself whether or not he should half undress her in the taxi and look at her body. He was interested in her reactions and wondered what she would do. I could get away with it, he reasoned. She'd protest and put up a struggle of course, but I've got her eating out of my hand. She thinks I'm the world's greatest lover and she's not far out. I'm up there at the top with all the experts. If only I could move into high society I'd never have to do another day's work as long as I live. There must be at least half a dozen duchesses looking for something as virile as me and I wouldn't take the bloody dog for a walk either. I've certainly got this one puzzled. She can't keep her eyes off me. I'm sending her mad and if I can get a cabaret bint drooling over me when there's a war on and she's got the choice of anything from a field marshal downwards, then I can't be bad. I suppose I'm drunk, Jackson thought. Drunk, but in charge. It can't be showing or that would put her off a bit. My head's as clear as a bell. I know I've had a hell of a lot to drink but I've never felt better in my life. I'm not drunk. I'm elated but I'm certainly not drunk. The chewing gum. That whore drugged me. That must be it but I don't mind. It's a glorious feeling. "English Bridge Cabaret," he shouted to the driver. "Step on it. Let's see you move."

"He knows where he is going," said Sylvia as she gently bit Jackson's ear.

"We'll dance," said Jackson and then remembered that he wasn't a very good dancer. I never bothered to learn, he thought. I mean, tearing around a dance floor at about eighty miles an hour getting into a sweat and trying to make polite conversation at the same time. I always let the idiots do all the work then I collected the one I wanted when she came to the bar or went to powder her nose.

He glanced sideways at Sylvia and smiled. I've certainly got this one eating out of my hand and she's a raving beauty and I won't have to buy her. She'll give it to me, free, and count herself lucky. The taxi stopped suddenly and Jackson and Sylvia were almost thrown out of their seats. They clung to each other and laughed then climbed out of the taxi and Jackson paid the fare and they waited on the pavement, and a minute later another taxi pulled up and Lynch and his girl climbed out. The girl looked dishevelled and Lynch winked at Jackson and they all walked towards the cabaret.

Jackson and Sylvia sat in a private box near the dance floor. It was hot and smoky in the cabaret and sweating soldiers sat at tables drinking cold beer. Some had girls with them and the girls beat their fists on the tables and shouted to attract the waiters' attention, and when they weren't screaming at the waiters they were beating the soldiers' groping hands away.

The band belted out popular songs and a Jewess crooned into the microphone.

Jackson, watching Lynch dancing, laughed and pointed him out to Sylvia and she craned her neck to see him and his partner better. Lynch, wringing wet with sweat, was dancing the jitterbug. "Can't old Terry move," shouted Jackson. "I've never seen anything so fast in my life. What a time we're having. What a wonderful bloody time." He felt incredibly, crazily happy, as he held on to the table. Everything's marvellous he thought. I've never been so bloody happy in my life. He laughed until the tears flooded his eyes and coursed down his cheeks and he couldn't stop laughing

and didn't want to. Everything was so bloody wonderful. The smoke-filled room, the sweating soldiers, the drunks sitting dopey eyed at their tables. The cheaply dressed, heavy breasted girls. The table rocked as Jackson, laughing hysterically, held on to it. Sylvia, watching him, felt vaguely troubled. "Johnnie," she said quietly. But he didn't hear her. "Please, Johnnie," she said in a louder voice as he picked up his glass and tried to drink from it, and spilled champagne down his chin. "Johnnie, please. I think you have been drinking too much." She took the glass away from him. "Johnnie," she spoke sharply as she held his arm and shook him. "Shut up," he said as he glanced at her and then started laughing again. Sylvia moved closer to him. She was anxious now. "What is the matter?" She turned him towards her and searched his face. "Johnnie, you are very drunk." Jackson suddenly stopped laughing. Who the hell's this? he wondered. Who's this bloody whore pawing at me. Did she say I was drunk or did she say she wanted a drink? "What did you say?" he shouted above the noise of the band.

"Johnnie, please." Sylvia smiled sweetly at him. "Do not drink any more. I think we should leave."

"Are you giving me orders?" Jackson shouted as he glared at her.

"No," Sylvia protested. "But I think we should leave."

"No one gives me orders. Got that? If the bloody army can't make me jump then nobody can. All this lot. Sheep." Jackson waved his arm towards the soldiers. "They obey orders. Load rifles, fix bayonets, put one up the spout and march in and what happens? What happens, eh? They get their names scrubbed off the next pay parade. Sheep. The bloody army can make the silly bastards do anything. But not me. Nobody tells me."

"Johnnie," Sylvia pleaded. "I don't know what you are saying, but please come home."

Jackson looked about him. Where am I? he wondered. What a dump this is. Who brought me here? He shook his head with a bewildered look in his eyes. The band was making an awful racket and the noise offended his ears. He stared at the dancers and was overwhelmed with disgust as he gazed at the sweating grinning

soldiers and the cheaply dressed girls. Those teeth, he thought, those bloody awful discoloured stinking teeth. Those slack mouths and those hanging bouncing tits and the stink of sweat and the lousy cheap perfume. For Chrissake look at them. They can't be human. They're bloody animals. All they think about is stuffing grub and booze into their rotten bodies and crawling over each other in bed. They're worse than bloody animals.

He felt vastly superior. Are they supposed to be enjoying themselves? Is this the way they entertain their bloody selves? Then the sooner they get back up the front and get shot the better. And the sooner I get back to the desert. Who's this pulling at my arm. He shrugged Sylvia away. "Johnnie, please tell me what is the matter," he heard a voice say close to his ear. But he ignored the voice. The desert, he thought. I must get back. I must take a walk and keep walking and get away from everybody. Get away from the stinking human race and then sit down and think. It doesn't matter what the hell I think about so long as I get away from the stinking human race. If God invented this lot then he was wasting his time. He could have been better employed making mud pies. Or if this shower started as fish and crawled out of the sea and settled in the mud then got their land legs, then took to the trees, then came down from the trees, then the sooner they go back to the sea and drown their bloody selves the better. I must get out of this dump . . .

Those bloody hands pulling at me again. He turned his head and got Sylvia into focus and saw a girl's face staring anxiously at him. A young pretty face with pleading eyes and unhappy trembling lips. Her eyes are green, he thought, beautiful. He glanced downwards then stared into her eyes again. Lovely figure, but her eyebrows. Why the hell doesn't she pluck her eyebrows? Disgusting! The girl's lips moved. "Johnnie, are you ill?" He hated her voice. Bloody wog, he thought. Suppose she wants me to buy her a drink. She'll be lucky. If she puts her hands on me again, I'll . . .

Sylvia tried to put her arms about his neck. She was frightened. "Please, Johnnie . . ."

Jackson pushed her away then hit her violently in the face and she reeled back and crashed against the side of the private box, then fell on to the floor and lay for a few seconds too dazed to move. Then she felt the warm blood gushing from her nose and into her mouth and she screamed in terror and kept on screaming.

The band abruptly stopped playing.

Jackson turned his back on Sylvia and stared at the motionless dancers. Why have they stopped dancing, he wondered. Sylvia's girl friend ran towards the private box and saw Sylvia lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, and she too started screaming as she struck out at Jackson with her handbag. He warded off the blows. Lynch ran to the box, glanced down at Sylvia, then shouted at Jackson: "What's the matter with you? Why did you do that?" Jackson grinned at Lynch. "Come on," shouted Lynch, as he pulled at Jackson's battle-dress blouse. "We've got to get out of here."

The girl, still screaming, climbed into the box and knelt down beside Sylvia. "Come on," shouted Lynch again and half dragged Jackson out of the box. Good idea, thought Jackson. Let's get out of this dump. Two waiters ran to him and held his arms and started shouting. Jackson struggled free and in a sudden rage he hit out and one of the waiters fell over and didn't get up again. The second waiter aimed a blow at Jackson and hit him on the chin. Jackson shook his head and punched the waiter and watched him stagger back then fall over. They go down, he thought, and when I hit them they stay down. This elated him and he turned to Lynch and laughed. "Come on," shouted Lynch again and they ran towards the exit. On the way out Jackson punched another waiter who tried to stop him, then ran and caught up with Lynch and they ran into the street. "Keep running," shouted Lynch, and Jackson increased his pace and they crossed the English Bridge then slowed down and started walking.

"Taxi," said Jackson. "Better get a taxi."

"You walk," said Lynch. "You crazy bastard. Come on. Walk."

What's the matter with him, wondered Jackson. He seems to be in a bit of a state.

"And we'll get off the main road," panted Lynch. "We don't want to run into any Red Caps."

"Who cares?" Jackson walked on, then glanced upwards at the black, star filled sky. Beautiful, he thought. All those stars. Fantastic. Then he laughed because he was feeling wonderfully happy again. It was good to be out in the cold night air. Good to be walking. His body tingled and he felt full of energy and fit and strong.

"You can laugh," snarled Lynch as he turned off the main road. "Are you crazy or something? Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" enquired Jackson pleasantly. Where are we, he wondered as he gazed about him. We crossed a bridge and I wanted to stop and look at the water. Funny thing, but I don't think I've ever even noticed the Nile, and this time I wanted to look at it. But I was running. Why the hell was I running? Why are we walking so fast now? What's all the hurry? That's the trouble nowadays. Everybody's in such a bloody hurry. What's Terry shouting about now? Why does he keep shouting?

"You know what you did," bawled Lynch. "Don't kid me you don't know."

Jackson glanced at Lynch then abruptly stopped.

"Come on," shouted Lynch. "Keep moving." He hurried on.

He's getting on my nerves, thought Jackson. We don't have to keep up this pace. "Where are we going anyway?" he shouted after Lynch. "What are you talking about? What did I do?"

Lynch retraced his steps then stopped and glared at Jackson. "You must be going crazy. They were a couple of smarters and we were all right there."

"Who?" enquired Jackson with a puzzled expression.

"The girls," shouted Lynch. "Those two lovely bloody girls."

"What happened to them, then?" enquired Jackson.

"You belted yours," Lynch looked thoroughly disgusted. "You knocked hell out of her."

"Me?" He's out of his mind, thought Jackson. What's he talking about? If he thinks I go around beating up girls . . .

"Yes, you. You crazy bastard." Lynch pushed Jackson in the

chest. "You did. You." He pushed him again. "You belted her."

"Don't do that, Terry," protested Jackson. "Don't shove me around."

"You're out of your bloody head. Aw, come on. I'm heaving you into the first taxi and getting you back to the hotel. Come on."

Jackson, watching Lynch's retreating back, suddenly remembered all that had happened in the cabaret; "Terry," he shouted. "I went off her."

"Come on," shouted back Lynch.

Jackson trotted after Lynch and quickly caught up with him. I must work things out, he thought. He remembered the incident quite clearly now. He had punched her with all his force right between the eyes. Why did I do that? he wondered. Why did I punch her? And suddenly he remembered. "Her bloody eyebrows," he shouted. "Her eyebrows almost met over her nose. Bloody disgusting."

"You lunatic," said Lynch. "Mine would have been smashing in bed. Now what are we going to do?"

"The logical thing," Jackson said reasonably, "is to get two more."

Lynch stopped and struck a match and looked at his watch. "It's turned midnight. Now tell me where we're going to find them?"

Jackson thought for a few moments. "The hotel," he said finally.

"You nutter," said Lynch as he walked away. "We phone the manager do we, and tell him to send up a bottle of Scotch and two bints."

"Worth a try," said Jackson who was feeling elated again.

"I was mad about that girl," Lynch walked faster. "Mad about her, and you, you silly bastard..." He stopped suddenly and stared angrily at Jackson. "I ought to do you over. I had it all lined up." He started shouting again. "I was crazy about that girl." He punched out viciously and Jackson staggered backwards. "I'll bloody kill you. Kill you," raved Lynch as he moved towards Jackson, punching wildly with both hands. Jackson hit out and Lynch slipped and almost fell over. "Calm down," snarled Jackson

as he punched Lynch in the face again. "If you don't calm down, you bastard, I'll kill you." They wrestled and shouted at each other, then calming down a little they separated and stood staring at each other. "You want the bloody Red Caps to cart us away, you bloody nutter?" said Lynch as he walked away.

"Come back," shouted Jackson after him. "Don't you want to finish it?"

Lynch increased his pace.

"You're running out," jeered Jackson as he trotted after Lynch.

"Don't start it again," said Lynch as Jackson caught up with him.

"Start what?" laughed Jackson. "I didn't start anything. You started it."

"You're useless." Lynch glanced sideways at Jackson.

"So are you," laughed Jackson. "You're a bloody reject."

They walked on in silence then turned into a narrow street. Then, after a long pause Lynch glanced sideways at Jackson again. "Sorry," he said.

Jackson laughed. "Didn't feel a thing." Then he stopped and put his arms round Lynch and hugged him. "Didn't feel a thing," he repeated and they both laughed and walked on.

"We're deep in the wog quarters now," said Lynch sniffing the air. "Smell it."

Jackson pulled a face. "Yes. Bloody disgusting."

"They'd knife you for sixpence down any of these streets." Lynch walked faster.

"You worried, Terry?"

"No. Funny thing, I'm not. But let's use our loaf. Head towards the main road, Johnnie."

"You are worried," laughed Jackson.

"Think I couldn't handle a few wogs?" Lynch sounded as confident as he felt. "But we won't find a taxi until we get back on to the main drag."

"I could go on all night. I could walk all night," said Jackson. As they turned a corner they could hear the traffic on the main road and they headed towards it.

"I want a girl," said Lynch.

"Everything's shut down. We'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"I still want a girl."

"Yes," Jackson cursed himself under his breath. Fancy doing a crazy thing like that, he thought. I mean, fancy doing that. Punching the poor bitch. Daft, I must be out of my mind. He turned his head and looked at Lynch. "She was a nice girl, Terry, so why did I do it? She was a damn nice girl."

"You're out of your silly little slovenly mind," said Lynch as he turned into the main road and lifted his arm and hailed a passing taxi. "And from here on you've got to watch every move you make."

8

The waiter's hands trembled as he held his tray.

"Your eyes are sick," said Jackson. "What do you mean coming into our room wearing a sick pair of eyes?"

The waiter smiled nervously and the glasses rattled on the tray.

"Put the glasses and the bottle on the table," said Lynch.

The waiter moved towards the table.

"I'll tell you when to move," said Jackson.

The waiter halted and turned his pleading, sick eyes towards Lynch.

"Chuck it in, Johnnie," said Lynch. "Put it on the table," he said to the waiter.

The waiter placed the bottle of Scotch and the glasses on the table then glanced at Lynch and waited.

"Did you wash your hands before you handled our glasses?" enquired Jackson.

"Yessir " the waiter switched on a nervous smile.

"Let's see your hands."

"Pack it in, Johnnie," said Lynch.

The waiter showed Jackson the palm of one hand with a foolish smile on his face.

"Black," said Jackson. "Your hands are black, you black bastard."

"You pay, sir, please," said the waiter with a beseeching smile.

"Pay him and shut up," said Lynch as he poured two drinks.

"He's got sick eyes," said Jackson. "He's got the clap, the three-card trick, a full house and a touch of the other."

"You pay, sir, please," said the waiter.

"Pay him, Johnnie, and stop yapping." Lynch handed Jackson a drink.

"Why should I? He won't even try to get us a couple of girls."

"No girls, sir," fawned the waiter. "This very good hotel. Very clean."

"Very nice," jeered Jackson. "Very respectable. It's a bug-ridden hole, you black bastard. And you've got sick eyes and you must have got them somewhere so send her up to us."

"You nutter," said Lynch and started laughing.

"I've never been sick," said Jackson. "Up to now I've been dead lucky, but I need that experience to complete my education. Send me up a sick girl," he shouted at the waiter.

"No girls, sir," said the waiter. "You pay me, please, for drink."

"No girls," said Lynch. "Get it into your thick head. They're out of stock."

Jackson threw a crumpled five pound note on to the floor. "Pick it up and put the change on the table, and don't try to rob me, you robbing black bastard."

The waiter picked up the money and placed the change on the table.

"Good," said Jackson watching him carefully. "Now pick up one stinking Egyptian pound note."

The waiter held a pound note in his hand and looked at Jackson.

"Fold it."

The waiter folded the note.

"That's for you," said Jackson. "For the lousy service and for this bug-ridden room. Now get out."

"Yessir," fawned the waiter. "You very kind, sir." He hurried to the door, opened it and ran out.

"I told you we wouldn't get any girls," said Lynch.

Jackson sat on his bed. "Terry, if only I could get my hands on dear little Lena, the bitch, the lousy little bitch." He picked up his glass and emptied it and the whisky burned his throat and made him choke. He coughed and spluttered as the tears swam out of his eyes. I know I'm half out of my mind, he thought. That damned drug works in the strangest way. One moment elated and wonderfully happy, then suddenly black depression. "I'd kill her if I could get my hands on her," he said.

"I know," said Lynch.

"Tomorrow I'll find her and kill her." Jackson topped up his glass with whisky.

"Tomorrow, if we're still crazy, we don't go out," said Lynch. "And take it easy with the whisky."

"Tomorrow I'll kill her." Jackson stared at the bright unshaded light hanging from the ceiling and blinked his eyes.

"Take another cold shower, Johnnie."

Jackson quickly undressed. "Was it hashish?"

"God knows," said Lynch. "Whatever it was, it works. Now put yourself and your little truncheon under a cold shower."

Jackson walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower and stood with his head hanging down. The cold water helped to calm him a little but his head throbbed. She must be crazy, he thought. If it's hashish you don't eat it, you smoke it, and only a little at a time, in the old hubbly bubbly pipe. God knows how much of it I ate. She must be crazy. "Terry," he shouted. "Why don't you have a word with the manager?"

Lynch opened the bathroom door. "Move over." He stood next to Jackson under the shower and felt better as the cold water cascaded down on to his naked body. "If we start kicking up hell, Johnnie, the manager may get on the phone to the Red Caps."

"All wogs are corrupt," said Jackson through his chattering teeth. "Buy the bastard. Tell him to send up his sisters or his daughters or his grandmother. Buy the bastard. Show him some money."

"Calm down or I'll belt you," said Lynch.

"I'll kill her. That bitch has got to go. Tomorrow I'll track her down and kill her."

"I'm not letting you loose on the streets until you've calmed down, Johnnie. I've locked the door and hidden the key."

Good, thought Jackson; the cold water helped to soothe him. At least under a cold shower I can think fairly rationally, he thought. But I know that if I ever see her again I'll kill her. I'm like a wild animal in the rutting season. I must, must, must try and stay calm. Mustn't go out. I could commit murder and not even know about it. The water was cold and his teeth chattered together. Stay under it. God, it's cold. But it's the best medicine. Stay under. Why did that crazy bitch do this to me? All my women try and wreck me? Why? Stop thinking about women and stop thinking about her . . . Legs, her lovely, lovely long slim white soft legs and above . . . stop it! Do you want to go mad? Eggs, bacon, liver, tomatoes, chips. Horrible. Can't face food. Must keep calm. Stick a bayonet in a German's guts and step back smartly and watch the blood pour out. Very nice for the jolly old war effort. Fly high over Germany, release the bombs, miss the jolly old target as usual, and kill a few dozen women and kids. Jolly good night's work, Jackson. All Germans are bastards . . . so they are. Square-headed bastards. How do you know? How do I know? I read it in the papers. Heard it on the wireless. My dad told me so. All the French are frogs. All the Ities are wogs, and all Germans are square-headed bastards, and what are you then, Jackson? Me? I'm a darling. I'm British. So I must be a decent sort of chap, mustn't I? Everyone knows that. God's on our side. What, even when we're bombing women and kids? Stop thinking about women, even dead ones. Dead ones, dead ones. Ugh! Even I don't fancy a dead one. Shall I ask Terry if he'd like a dead one? No. He may go mad again. That poor old cow in Benghazi the Kiwi nearly kicked to death. Ugh! You still don't fancy her so there's hope for you. Keep thinking about her. Ugh! Jackson shivered violently under the shower. That's better. That's easing the agony. I hit that

nice sweet girl right between the eyes. What a bloody awful thing to do and she was crazy about me. "Terry, I'll have to see Sylvia and try and explain," he shouted.

"I wouldn't if I were you."

"She was a nice kid."

"You were out of your mind, Johnnie. You didn't know what you were doing."

"How could I do that?" Jackson felt deeply ashamed as he stepped from under the shower and dried himself. "I loved that girl, Terry." His eyes clouded with tears. "You don't know what she meant to me."

"Shut up," laughed Lynch. "She was just another ride."

"I could talk to her," Jackson shouted back. "You don't know what that means to me. Finding a girl I can talk to." He was half crying and enjoying the waves of self pity as they flowed through him. "The way people treat us over here. You'd think we were the scum of the earth. And I have to meet a cabaret bint. A whore. She's the only person in Cairo who really understands me and she was crazy about me. She loved me. She'd do anything for me and I bet I wouldn't have had to pay her. Do you know what it means when a whore gives it to you for nothing? It means she loves you. So what did I do? I beat her up. I must be the biggest bastard alive."

"A stupid bastard," agreed Lynch.

I'm going crazy again, thought Jackson. Get back under the shower. He shivered as the cold water hit him. I'm half out of my mind. God, it's going to be a long night. The longest night I've ever known. If dear old mum could see me now she wouldn't dare put her face inside the Baptist chapel again. No, maybe she wouldn't be all that surprised. I went on strike when I was fourteen and never put my nose inside the dump again. God may be love; pity she didn't love me more. I suppose she did. Just couldn't show it. That sharp, pinched face of hers wasn't made for showing love. She was a good woman, I suppose. Good to the neighbours anyway. But why do good women always keep reminding you

about how good they are? Poor old dad; no wonder he went on the beer. Always went to chapel on Sundays, though. He wouldn't dare say no to that. Pity about him. He never did anybody any harm. Too wet to harm anybody. Jackson shivered. If only I hadn't gone crazy. I'd be in bed with Sylvia now and I'd be . . .

"Don't think about it," he shouted.

"Don't go crazy again," said Lynch.

"OK." Jackson nodded his head miserably. Think about anything, but don't think about that. Food? Not hungry. Money?

"Terry, where's our money? Anybody could walk in."

"I've locked the door."

"Did we spend much?" Who cares, thought Jackson, but I must keep my mind off that.

"No idea. I've hidden the money."

"Where?"

"All over the room."

"Why did you do that?" protested Jackson.

"Don't know. Seemed a good idea at the time."

"You're crazy too."

"I know," laughed Lynch. "But it will give us something to do finding it again, won't it."

"You're on the right track," Jackson stepped away from the shower and shook himself like a dog. "We won't sleep. Won't be able to sleep so we may as well go on a bloody treasure hunt. We shouldn't drink, should we? It may send us crazy."

"I'm hoping I'll knock myself out. Can't take any more." Gasping and shivering Lynch moved away from the shower and dried himself. "We may be like this for days."

"Shut up," shouted Jackson. "Shut up!"

"Tomorrow. May be OK by tomorrow."

"I'm praying," groaned Jackson. "You can't know how hard I'm praying."

"Here," laughed Lynch. "One thing I've found out, I'm not queer anyway. I'm as randy as an old buck rabbit, but I still don't fancy you."

The swaying, clanging trams, with their half crazed drivers, ringing the bell and screaming abuse at everyone, and no one in particular, and the street traders, shouting their wares at the tops of their lungs, and the shoe-shine boys' shrill voices as they pursued them through the streets, made Jackson and Lynch screw up their

It was a long night and the sweltering heat that blasted upwards from the bedroom to the smells from the gutters, made their stomachs and longing for sleep, but they strooped into a shop and made no promise. Hair cut, shave, hot towels, rang the bell for service and ordered a bill that would make himself to be very polite to the waiters, their spirits a little.

floor or stretch out on their beds again, longed for the barber's shop they would walk back to the shower. They ordered, they could now not eat it. They drank raw whisky until their stomachs seemed to be then ordered raw eggs and milk and drank more whisky. Then, with a day dragged on and then it was night again, standing shivering under the showers, docile and exhausted and feeling sick. Jackson as fell asleep under the shower and when he came to he was lying curled up like a baby, shivering with the cold water still cascading down on him, and every nerve in his body seemed to be jumping and he started screaming. He felt better after that and returned to the bedroom and collapsed on to the bed, but still he couldn't sleep so he started drinking again.

The early morning sun shone into the room and hurt his eyes and made him feel sick, so he pulled the curtains and stretched out on the bed and so another day dragged on as they moved restlessly from the bedroom to the shower, and sometime during the afternoon Lynch returned from the shower.

"I'm OK," he said. "Think I'm OK." His voice was little more than a whisper as he pulled back the bedclothes and thankfully climbed into bed, but he could not fall asleep at once. His nerves were still twitching so he switched on his favourite day-dream. The one that could usually be counted on to put him to sleep. He had fought, and easily beaten, the middle-weight champion of the world, and had challenged the light heavy-weight champion of the world, and knocked him out in the seventh round, and now he was

about how good they are? Poor old dad; no wonder he went on the beer. Always went to chapel on Sundays, though. He wouldn't dare say no to that. Pity about him. He never did anybody a harm. Too wet to harm anybody. Jackson shivered. If only the nights gone crazy. I'd be in bed with Sylvia now and I'd be Louis' chin.

"Don't think about it," he shouted.

"Don't go crazy again," said Lynch. But he was not going

"OK." Jackson nodded his head, left hand, and if he could thing, but don't think about the fight in his favour. Lynch still

"Terry, where's our mouth possibly tell that Louis had smashed

"I've locked the door round. Every movement sent sharp stabbing

"Did we spend his left side, but he gritted his teeth and fought keep my mind, cut eye blurred his vision and he had constantly to

"No idea blood away on the back of his glove. The crowd were

"Was mad and cheering him on. The loved a game little 'un.

Lynch fought on, keeping one arm down to protect his ribs. Joe Louis looked as if he was slowing down, but Lynch knew that he was still dangerous as he punched him away again and again. Lynch was still moving well on his toes, but it was a bluff. He was leg weary and knew that if he could not end the fight in this round he was finished. He must get close to Louis and sneak in his block-busting left hook. It only had to travel six inches. Gritting his teeth, he walked into a rain of blows, then his left hand moved with the speed of lightning and he saw a dazed look creep into Louis' eyes before he crashed to the canvas. Eight . . . Nine . . . Out.

No good, thought Lynch. It didn't work this time. Shall I fight for the world middle-weight title again? No. Pretty small fry after beating Joe Louis. His restless mind went back to the village where he was born, and to the pub his father had boozed away. Somehow he could not hate his old dad. A good-natured man, who had been over generous all his life, and was now working as potman at the pub that he once owned. How can I hate him, the poor old sod? Lynch reasoned. Like father, like son. If he hadn't boozed it away, I suppose I would have, and I've always been an easy touch. Pity about poor old mum, though, working as a bar-

about how good they are? Poor old dad; no wonder he went on the beer. Always went to chapel on Sundays, though. He wouldn't dare say no to that. Pity about him. He never did anybody a harm. Too wet to harm anybody. Jackson shivered. If only I'd been gone crazy. I'd be in bed with Sylvia now and I'd be Louis' chin.

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No good, thought Lynch. It didn't work this time. What Lynch, for the world middle-weight title again? No. Pretty go out, after beating Joe Louis. His restless mind went back to where he was born, and to the pub his father had liked that he Somehow he could not hate his old dad. A good-looking eyes. He's who had been over generous all his life, and was not bright sun-potman at the pub that he once owned. How can I? Put myself poor old sod? Lynch reasoned. Like father, like son, how I feel boozed it away, I suppose I would have, and I've easy touch. Pity about poor old mum, though, workers of Cairo.

The swaying, clanging trams, with their half crazed drivers, ringing the bell and screaming abuse at everyone, and no one in particular, and the street traders, shouting their wares at the tops of their lungs, and the shoe-shine boys' shrill voices as they pursued them through the streets, made Jackson and Lynch screw up their eyes in pain, and the sweltering heat that blasted upwards from the pavements and the smells from the gutters, made their stomachs heave. In desperation they trooped into a shop and made no protest as the barbers went into action. Hair cut, shave, hot towels, friction, shampoo, manicure, and finally a bill that would make even a millionaire shudder, had restored their spirits a little.

Powdered, perfumed and pampered, they left the barber's shop and were somewhat surprised to discover that they could now stand the harsh sunlight and even the street noises seemed to be somewhat muted and almost bearable. After a light lunch, with a cold beer to help it down, they made their way to an air-conditioned cinema and enjoyed the twilight gloom and the coolness as they watched a steely eyed Alan Ladd get himself in and out of a dozen impossible situations.

In a bar next door to the cinema Jackson said: "What a load of old rubbish. He was a dead duck at least half a dozen times." Lynch was amazed at Jackson's reaction and protested violently: "It was a great picture. Why do you always have to knock everything?"

Jackson had enjoyed the coolness inside the cinema and even some of the impossible action, but he hated heroes who could go through a town, armed only with a Smith and Wesson, which he rarely used, and a fantastically effective left hook, which he used frequently. Something told Jackson that one man could not clean up a town unless he was aided by the army, air force and possibly the navy. Not to mention the police force, but he decided not to argue. He knew that men like Lynch, ninety-nine per cent of the world's population in fact, believed in heroes the way kids believed in fairies. He was bored, anyway, and his hangover still troubled him. Finishing his drink, he nodded to the door and they both made their way back to their hotel.

The next day they still felt rather shaky as they strolled down Soloman Pasha Street, pausing now and again to look in shop windows. Lynch was searching for a present. Something expensive and different, but only the most commonplace articles he stared at really appealed to him. This vaguely bothered him, because he wanted nothing but the best for his girl, who wrote to him every week, assuring him that she would always be faithful. She was a simple girl with a heart of gold, thin match-stick legs and a surprisingly large bosom, and she lived in a small village well off the beaten track. Even the sex hungry GIs stationed ten miles away on a desolate plain hadn't discovered the village. So there was nothing for Doris to do but milk the cows, clean out the pig sties, cook and clean, and knit socks for the troops, and dream of her loved one who was fighting for freedom.

Lynch stared at a black metal bracelet. A card stated that it was inlaid with twenty-four carat gold. He quickly decided that Doris wouldn't like it. Too fancy, but what the hell could he buy her? He suddenly felt irritated with Doris. What about that nightie? The see-through one? Somehow, he couldn't visualise Doris in a see-through black lace nightie. She was a devout virgin and was determined to stay that way until she was married. He had tried some gentle persuasion once and she hadn't spoken to him for a whole week. He liked Doris very much, but he wasn't in love with her. But he knew that when her father died she would inherit the farm and that would take care of his future, if he played his cards right. He moved on to the next shop and stared pensively at his reflection in a full length mirror, then slowly moved on and paused at another shop window, with his hands in his pockets rattling his loose change.

Jackson stared at a gold bracelet, then leaned forward to read the price tab and whistled under his breath. I should buy Madge a present, he thought, but she's not getting that. He moved to the next window. Perfume. No. Everyone buys perfume. Boy, oh boy, look at that black lace nightie. I can see her in that. See about all of her. He moved towards the open door, then suddenly stopped in his tracks. I must be going mad, he thought. Why should I buy

her that for someone else's benefit. Be your age, Johnnie. He walked on, then paused at another shop window. The shop displayed officers' uniforms and kit. Regimental badges, medal ribbons, and sleeping bags. He was about to move on when he heard a loud voice demand: "Hands out of your pockets. Turn round and stand up straight, corporal. That's better. Now let's have your AB64 and leave pass."

Jackson slowly turned his head and watched Lynch, confronted by two Red Caps, fumbling in his pocket, then he suddenly made a run for it, but the sergeant Red Cap was too quick for him. He neatly tripped Lynch up and sent him sprawling. Jackson did some quick thinking and walked briskly into the shop. Ten minutes later, he walked out of the shop wearing a Tank Corps beret, a smart new uniform and tie, and he carried a swagger cane tucked under his arm. He had promoted himself to the rank of captain.

A patrol wagon was parked against the kerb, and the Red Caps were trying to persuade Lynch to get into the back of the wagon, but he was not being very co-operative. As Jackson drew abreast of them, the sweating, red-faced sergeant let go of Lynch for a moment and threw up a smart salute, which Jackson casually returned, then grinned to himself as he saw Lynch stop struggling and stare at him, then double up with laughter. The Red Caps jumped on him and tossed him into the back of the wagon and drove away.

Jackson walked on. Why didn't I think of this before, he wondered as he paused to admire himself in a full length mirror. I certainly look the part. I really do make a wizard officer. Don't forget to sprinkle the jolly old chat with a few "good shows", and "old boys", and "rathers", and "amazings", and "frightfullys", and "I means", and "actuallys", and you'd better be firm with any silly young sods who are junior to you. Why didn't I make myself up to major? Or colonel? I could have promoted myself to field marshal. It wouldn't have cost much more. As a newly appointed field marshal I could go up to the front and stop the war and hand over North Africa to Rommel, and that way I'd be doing everybody a favour.

Jackson was suddenly madly in love with himself and could hardly bear to tear his eyes away from the splendidly uniformed trim figure that stared back at him with an insolent smile from the full-length mirror. Reluctantly, he stopped the love affair and walked on, then, briskly crossed the road and stared thoughtfully at Shephard's Hotel. I always wanted to see the inside of this dear old dump, he thought as he casually strolled up the steps and stopped and switched on a faintly amused smile as he glanced along the terrace at the officers seated at tables with the other ranks. ATS girls and Wrens. It's marvellous, he thought. This Palace of Delights is out of bounds to other ranks, but they make an exception if the ORs wear skirts. No wonder we can't get a look in. He glanced swiftly from table to table. Not much talent here. That little Wren's not got bad legs, though. I bet if I went into action I could send her mad with joy. She's looking at me and she's interested. She's a good judge. She must be regretting that she's with that fat-gutted old slob. He pointed his cane towards the hotel entrance, then called out: "Tim, old boy," and waved his cane frantically as he caught sight of the fat major glaring at him.

As he walked into the hotel he thought I should have some fun from now on. What a lousy old dump this is. It's like a bloody morgue and there's one of the bodies sitting up and waving. Who's he waving at? Oh, the wog waiter. Large whisky. Thought so. It will soon be coming out of his ears by the look of him. Base wallah, living the life of old Reilly. Full colonel, staff car, driver, and I bet she's an ATS bint who gives him a bit on the side. Batman, three square meals a day and all the booze he can knock back. I bet he'll be heart broken when this war's over, and come to think about it, so would I be if I were in his boots. Look at this shower. Honestly, a full retreat on and they sit here boozed up to their ear holes. Ears, old boy, watch it. Suppose they're the GHQ wallahs, who are running the show.

Fantastic. I bet they couldn't run a teddy bears' picnic. If Rommel knew the true state of affairs here he'd parachute in six Huns,

armed with their knife, fork, spoon and mess tins, and they'd go through this dump like a dose of salts. Remember to be easy and relaxed. Jackson shook his head as a servile waiter approached him, then walked slowly towards the bar and ordered a large whisky. As he picked up his glass he glanced at two young second lieutenants, who stood stiffly at the bar speaking in hushed tones. Jackson lifted his glass to his lips. Feel quite comfortable, he thought, and my accent should pass. But don't try and put it on. Be natural. Pity about old Terry, but he wouldn't get away with it. He finished his whisky, all the time keeping his ear tuned in to the very young and very junior officers' conversation. Middle-class wallahs, Jackson decided. Fair to middling public school, not the upper crust lot. Infantry. Lobster red faces, only been over here a week or two. Gun fodder. I don't suppose they'll last long. He ordered another whisky in a cold clipped tone of voice. Mustn't be over polite to barmen and waiters, he cautioned himself. An English officer and gentleman is about the worst mannered bastard in the world when he's dealing with servants. The two young officers were discussing the campaign and Jackson was becoming increasingly bored with Shephard's bar, until he suddenly noticed a poster pinned to the wall. "Careless Talk Costs Lives." He brightened up and tapped the fair-haired young officer on the shoulder with his cane, and the young man turned and automatically stiffened to attention. "Sir?"

"What's your name?"

"Carter, sir."

"At ease," said Jackson pleasantly, as he turned to the other young man: "And what's your name?"

"Rollings, sir."

Jackson thumped the poster with his swagger cane and both the young officers flushed crimson.

"Really, sir, I'm . . . I'm frightfully sorry," said Carter. "I honestly didn't think that . . ."

Jackson switched on a severe expression and interrupted Carter, "I know you didn't think. That's the trouble with you chaps. Jolly well don't think, do you? Just say the first silly thing that comes

into your head. Don't you realise that half the waiters in this hotel are German paid and the rest are anti-British?"

"Good Lord, sir. Is that a fact?" Carter looked somewhat shaken at this news. "I thought that we were pretty safe here. I mean, this is Shepherd's."

Jackson thumped the poster again and it fluttered to the floor, and the barman hastily left his bar and pinned the poster back on the wall. "King Farouk's got shares in this place," said Jackson.

"But, sir," protested Carter, "I thought that Farouk was absolutely with us. I mean," he added lamely, "he went to an English public school, didn't he?"

"That's an old trick," said Jackson. "Dozens of these foreign wallahs have taken advantage of our public schools to study us. But not to worry, we're keeping a close watch on them."

"Well, sir, thanks for the tip, anyway," said Carter.

Jackson picked up his glass. "You chaps new over here?"

"Yes, sir." The young officers both replied at once.

"Then you haven't seen the front line. Haven't seen any action yet?"

"No, sir," said Rollings. "But we can't wait to get cracking."

"That's the spirit," enthused Jackson. "The desert's an ideal place to learn your trade. There's no bloody civvies getting in your way up the blue. Apart from a few wogs, of course," he added. "But most of them blow themselves up on landmines, anyway."

"You mean, sir," said Rollings, "that the wogs are allowed to roam about all over the desert. I mean, when there's a war on?"

"Well, they do live in the bloody sand," said Jackson.

"Of course, sir," agreed Rollings. "What's it like in the front line, sir?"

"Great fun," said Jackson enthusiastically. "I wouldn't have missed this war for anything." He pursed his lips and then said very quietly, "But how are we chaps going to settle down to a humdrum life in civvy street when this lot's over?"

"I must confess, sir," said Carter, "I've thought about that. Seem pretty dull, won't it?"

"Well," Jackson toyed with his glass, "we can count on another three or four years, I suppose, so we may as well make the best of it."

"When are you going back up the front, sir?" enquired Rollings.

"I wouldn't be here now," Jackson tossed back his drink and stared into Rollings's eyes, "if I hadn't been wounded," he added.

"On sick leave are you, sir?" enquired Rollings.

"Stopped a nasty one, sir?" enquired Carter.

"In the guts," said Jackson cheerfully. "Only stray shrapnel, so it wasn't serious. God, this place bores me." He stared at the barman, then switched his attention to the ceiling and then the walls. "Nothing to do here except drink and chase after women. I can't wait to get back. We need all the chaps up there at a time like this."

"I know the retreat's still on, sir," said Carter, "but I'm sure we'll soon be going the other way. Jolly sure it will be our turn to chase Rommel's tail."

Jackson replaced his empty glass on the bar. "That's the spirit, chaps. Meanwhile, enjoy yourselves." He smiled pleasantly at the two young officers and marched out.

Jackson spent the rest of the day moving from one officers' bar to the next. He discussed with great seriousness the latest news from the desert, but was quick to pounce on anyone who even hinted that the Eighth Army were retreating. "You're playing into the enemy's hands," he would say, or "That's subversive. I can't stand here and let you get away with remarks like that. We aren't retreating, we're only shortening our lines of communication." In one bar a colonel, with a large bloated face, congratulated him on his splendid spirit. "We need more chaps like you, Jackson. Some of these bloody awful bastards have already got their tails between their legs."

Jackson readily agreed with him. "I know, sir. I doubt if there's a handful of men in this bar who're prepared to die for their king and country." The colonel heartily agreed and repeated Jackson's remark in a very loud voice. Later, the colonel told Jackson that he was in the Pay Corps. If he were a younger man he'd be up

front, of course. By midnight Jackson was very drunk and decided that the best thing to do was to find a hotel and put his head down for the night.

Major Spencer sipped his tea and stared at the crumpled body in the other bed. Frowning, he decided to speak to the man. Don't mind a chap getting stoned when he's on leave, but he can take his bloody boots off before he goes to bed.

"I say," he said. "I say, you." He repeated this several times before Jackson stirred and sat up in bed.

Major Spencer stared at Jackson and it was clear that he was not amused. "What time did you book in?"

Jackson stared, bleary eyed, at Major Spencer, then shifted his glance to the golf bag and clubs standing in a corner near the bed, then he stared at the fishing rod and tackle, the large tin trunk, the attaché cases and the travelling clock standing on the bed-side table. Where's his bloody compass, wondered Jackson. I'd better get out of here fast.

"My name's Spencer. Major Spencer."

"Er," Jackson thought hard for a moment. "Black." A pause as he stared at his boot sticking out of the bed. "Captain Black, sir."

"For God's sake, what kind of bloody uniform is that?"

"What?" Jackson was puzzled.

"Your shirt, man."

Jackson glanced down at his rumpled shirt and noticed the swastika badge on the pocket. "It's a gestapo shirt or something."

"I can see that."

"I found it up front." Must get out of here, thought Jackson, as he climbed out of bed and hobbled about the room in his shirt and pants in search of his other sock and boot.

"And those damned boots. Where the devil did you get those?"

"Italian boots, sir."

"Why are you wearing them?"

"I lost most of my kit."

"For God's sake," exploded Major Spencer. "You're supposed to be a British officer and British officers don't draw their kit from the bloody enemy. Where's the rest of your kit?"

Jackson struggled into his trousers. "I lost most of it when I bailed out of my tank."

"You mean you've no kit? Only the rubbish you stand up in?"

"Well . . . No . . ." Jackson was hurriedly dressing.

"Where's your damned kit then?"

"Er . . . at my hotel."

"Your hotel?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't this your damned hotel?"

"No."

"Where is your hotel?"

"Ah," said Jackson. "That's the problem."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I've got to find it."

"Got to find it?" Major Spencer stared at Jackson. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Jackson moved to the wash hand basin and turned on the tap. "I've lost it," he said simply.

"Lost it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lost your kit. Lost your damned hotel."

"Couldn't find it last night, sir," Jackson spluttered as he got soap up his nose.

"Couldn't find it," shouted Major Spencer.

"I expect it's still there," Jackson reached out blindly for a towel. "Got rather stoned last night."

"Bloody disgraceful behaviour."

"Met an old chum. Colonel Ottway."

"Still no excuse."

"He got pretty stoned too," said Jackson cheerfully, as he sat on his bed and laced up his boots.

"German shirt," snorted Major Spencer. "Italian boots. Can't even remember the name of your hotel."

"I'll track it down," said Jackson. "Still not quite with it this morning, sir."

"Think, man. It wouldn't be Shephard's?" Major Spencer stared at Jackson and thought. Good God, of course not. Shephard's wouldn't even allow this boulder past the door.

"No, it's not Shephard's," Jackson stared at his boots. Must get a pair of suede desert boots, he thought, and shirts, and kit, and a hold-all. I don't want to be third degree'd again.

"The International? Are you staying at the International?"

"Ah," said Jackson as he buttoned up his jacket, and thought, must get pyjamas too. Nothing loud. Simple pastel shades or good old conservative stripes, and underwear. "The International, sir. That seems to ring a bell."

"Phone them." Major Spencer nodded to the phone.

"I'm pretty sure it's the International." Jackson placed his beret on his head and picked up his swagger cane.

"Aren't you going to damn well shave?" spluttered Major Spencer.

"No, sir. Might do myself an injury. Anyway, I haven't my shaving kit with me."

"Can't go on the streets unshaved," shouted Major Spencer. "An officer wandering about unshaved."

"The wogs are first-class barbers." Jackson headed for the door.

"Look here," called out Major Spencer. "I want to know rather more about you."

Jackson threw up a casual salute. "Good show, sir. Meet you at Shephard's mid-day." He opened the door.

"Look here. What did you say your name was?"

"Black," smiled Jackson. "Now I really must track down my hotel." Jackson stepped smartly out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Major Spencer thought about Jackson's strange behaviour for a few moments, then carefully placed his cup on the bedside table, and climbed out of bed and opened the door and glanced along the deserted corridor, then slammed the door shut and stood near his bed deep in thought. Chap books in, in the middle of the night.

Tight as an owl. No damned kit. Wearing a Jerry shirt and Italian boots. What was his name? He picked up the phone and got through to the International Hotel, then slammed down the phone. Thought so. No Captain Black staying there. Blond, good looking. The fella's an enemy agent. Pleasant voice, but not public school. Something wrong with the voice. Hard to put your finger on it . . . but . . . the fella's a bloody spy, of course. Major Spencer picked up the phone again.

9

Jackson strolled down Soloman Pasha Street. It was a fine, sunny day and he felt perfectly happy. Ten days had passed since the Red Caps had picked up Lynch, and Jackson had wondered from time to time how he was getting on. The ten days had been a completely gorgeous waste of time. A boozy hazy ten days. He had soon discovered that Cairo was full of crazy idiots, all looking for a good time and very few of them finding it. Like the Springbok captain who had won five hundred pounds at the races and spent the lot on the girl with the golden bangles. The girl looked like Joan Bennett, only younger, and even more beautiful, and she drove a large expensive car, a gift from an Australian colonel.

Every lunch time Jackson had a drink with the Springbok captain. He was waiting for him to go broke so that he could take over the girl. She was beautiful, haughty, and expensive, and Jackson was mad about her, until the day arrived when the Springbok captain bought his last bottle of champagne, kissed the girl, and walked out of the bar, broke. Then the half-Turkish, half-English major, who worked for Intelligence and spoke Arabic, Turkish, English, German, Greek, Spanish, French and Italian,

and knew the Middle East like the back of his hand, and spent most of his days drinking whisky, called the girl over to the bar and the girl smiled sweetly into the half-English, half-Turkish major's eyes, and brushed against Jackson.

The major suddenly slipped the back of her dress down and showed Jackson a glimpse of the red welts on her back. The girl shrugged her dress into place and moved away and sat down. The major then told Jackson that her lover, a captain in the Egyptian Army, whipped her because she enjoyed being whipped and humiliated. He also took most of the money she earned, and he had seen her crawl on her hands and knees across the bar floor and kiss her lover's boots.

Jackson looked at the beautiful haughty girl seated at the table and knew that he had gone right off her.

There was the evening when, very drunk, he had told the half-English, half-Turkish major that he wasn't a bloody officer. "I'm an imposter," he had suddenly shouted, and had shown the major his AB64 to prove it. He had only the vaguest idea why he had told the major. Possibly he had suddenly taken a great liking to him, or needed to share the joke with someone. The major, who was stoned too, made him promise to report back as soon as he was broke, and Jackson instantly agreed that he would. Then the major borrowed twenty pounds to help speed up Jackson's return, and they became very good friends, and the major promised to defend Jackson if, and when, he was court martialled. One of the things that Jackson liked about the major was that he was completely disinterested in the war.

"I hope that England wins, of course," he said more than once. "But if the worst comes to the worst, the Germans will find me useful."

Jackson had winced when the major had first said that, and thought, this bastard's morals are in a worse bloody state than mine even, but at least he's honest. There was the day when he had run into Hawthorne, who was stuttering with excitement because he and O'Neill were being posted to Aden the next day. It was a new start for him and in future he was going to keep his big mouth shut

and steer clear of trouble. It was only as they were parting, after a drink in a quiet bar, that Hawthorne suddenly realised that Jackson had promoted himself to the rank of captain and he had walked away laughing hysterically.

I've always wanted to live like this, Jackson thought as he sauntered along the pavement, casually returning salutes and looking at the pretty girls. I suppose I'm a dead loss. I've no ambition and no interest in this bloody war. All I care about is having a good time and getting home in one piece. I could easily spend the rest of the war in bars and popping in and out of bed with beautiful Eastern maidens. If I've got to die, that's the way I want to go. Not by a shell with "This one's from Lili" chalked on it in German. No. It's home for me and all in one piece, and when they ask me, what did I do in the great war, I'll tell them, "Sweet Fanny Adams". Jackson smiled to himself as he stopped to look into a jeweller's window then walked on.

Sergeant Cameron half threw up a salute, then dropped his arm, and stared at Jackson. "What the hell are you doing in that rig-out, Johnnie?"

"You meet a better class whore if you're an officer, Jock," smiled Jackson.

"Och, you're sand happy," said Cameron. "Let's get somewhere off the main drag where we can talk." They turned down a side street and found a small bar. "Seen Lynch?" enquired Jackson as they settled themselves on bar stools.

"Aye, an escort collected him from the Red Caps, and he was smart enough to take Major Winters' punishment. Twenty-eight days in the glasshouse."

"It wasn't worth it," said Jackson. "He only had one day on the town. The rest of the time was sheer bloody misery."

"So he told me," agreed Cameron. "Seems he spent most of his time under a shower. You know, you've been AWOL a fortnight and you're deep in it."

Jackson grinned. "I've had a bloody marvellous time, and I don't mind taking Winters' punishment."

Cameron shook his head. "You'll no have the chance. It's a court martial for you."

"Is it?" Jackson looked thoughtful. "How long will I get?"

"If your crimes come through while you're waiting for the court to weigh you off, you'll never bloody well come out."

"One thing at a time, Jock. Fourteen days AWOL. What's it worth?"

"Well, seeing you went absent when a full retreat was on, the top brass will take a dim view of it. Twelve months, six, if you're damn lucky."

Jackson whistled softly under his breath. "I've had a damn good time but it wasn't as good as all that."

"Are you spent out?"

Jackson nodded his head. "Just about. Down to my last tenner."

"OK. Now, dive into the bog and demote yourself back to the ranks. If you're spotted dressed like a music-hall comic, you'll get at least three years."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Jackson. "Another week would bloody kill me." He glanced at his watch. "It's still early in the day, and anyway I've got to buy corporal's stripes."

"I'll see you're back before nightfall," said Cameron.

"OK." Jackson headed towards the lavatory, then stopped. "Think we can fix old Dodds?"

Cameron shook his head. "Not this time. It's out of his hands. Winters gave him a rocket because he lost you and Lynch."

"He's not a bad chap," said Jackson. "I'll have a word with him."

"Strip that bed," snarled Sergeant-Major Dodds.

Jackson looked about him. The stone floor was filthy and the white-washed walls were a dirty grey and flaking. The only furniture was a bed and a chair. He stripped the bed and threw the sheets, blankets and pillow on to the chair.

"And the mattress," said Dodds.

Jackson threw the mattress on to the floor and Dodds threw the mattress sheets and pillow through the open doorway, then he threw two blankets on to the bed. "You sleep on the springs," he grated. "Got it? On the bloody springs."

"Now look, Ted," protested Jackson.

"Don't try the old pals act on me," shouted Dodds. "Bloody Winters's been giving me plenty of stick because of you and Lynch." He pointed to the bed. "You sleep on the springs. One blanket under your arse, one over you. You'll scrub your cell out, clean your kit, then scrub your cell out again, and rub-a-dub your bloody kit. I'm going to make you suffer, you bastard."

"Charming," replied Jackson with a sour grin.

"A bloke only drops me in it once. Only once," raved Dodds as he marched out of the room.

Jackson turned over on the bed and groaned as he slowly sat up and switched on the light and glanced at his watch. Midnight. That bed's just about as comfortable as the showers, he thought, but I still don't fancy the floor. I don't want the bugs coming out of the woodwork and dragging me home and devouring me. Wish I had a packet of fags. I've never tumbled from riches to rags so fast in my life. He folded two blankets and sat on the edge of the bed and brooded about his present predicament.

I've been a damn fool, he soon decided, running out of the billet like that, but how was I to know that Jock would come to terms with old Dodds? I expected to be placed under close arrest and when they searched me, the three hundred odd quid would have taken a bit of explaining, wouldn't it? And anyway, I had a marvellous time spending it. Just as well I'm not filthy rich, he thought. I'd kill myself in no time, or would I? Say I was worth a million, and could do anything I wanted. What would I do? Travel? Yes, suppose I would. Go round the world. See everything. Buy race horses. No . . . the top-hat lot look pretty dull and dreary to me.

Might buy a few paintings. Not that I know much about art. Name half a dozen painters. Turner, Reynolds, Rembrandt, Van

Gogh, Gauguin. I like their stuff. Had a hell of a life, though, didn't they? But they were free. They lived as they wanted to. That's the important thing in this world. Freedom. That's what we're fighting for. Freedom. He pondered on this for a moment. Supposed to be fighting for freedom, he corrected himself, but he felt somewhat uneasy suddenly. Men are fighting and dying and what am I doing? Sitting here thinking about a booze-up and a million quid I'll never possess. Well, why not?

He searched his mind for the excuses. Why should I go in with a rifle and bayonet and hit the dust? Who is it going to help? No good, he thought. You're only evading the issue. Millions of men will fight and die. Millions . . . millions . . . millions . . . How about that? And they all want to live. He thought about this for a long moment. Crazy, he finally decided. They must be crazy, and I'm right to think they are all crazy. All the shouting politicians in the world can yell at me from now to doomsday and I won't believe a word they say. It's their job to see we have a good life, not to get us bumped off. All they can do is create crazy situations and then expect us to get them out of them, so that they can start all over again. Every time he thought about politicians and generals Jackson got angry so he deliberately let his mind go blank for a few moments, then: wish I had a packet of fags, floated through his mind. Food, and drink, and girls, and fags. They're the things that interest me. Well, I'm still young. I've hardly started living. I've got a lifetime ahead of me to learn . . . Learn what? God knows. To live. That's better, and make mistakes and maybe learn from my mistakes and maybe not. But nobody's going to decide how long I live. No crazy general or politician, anyway.

The door was suddenly and violently kicked open and Sergeant-Major Dodds staggered into the room with a bottle dangling in his left hand. He stared bleary eyed at Jackson. Dodds had lived most of his life in London and had been the chief instigator in a few minor crime waves in his day. Nothing crude like robbery with violence. He was a con man. A good piece of cut glass, set in a gold ring by an expert, then baked in an oven to make it sparkle, could, with the right speil, be sold to a mug for a handsome profit.

He had made some kind of a living out of mugs for twenty years or more. Anything was better than work. He was a cheap crook but, at least, he knew something about human frailty.

Staggering over to Jackson, he belched. "Got a fag?"

"No," said Jackson. "All I've got is a hangover."

"Silly lad, ain't you. Silly boy," said Dodds as he fumbled in his pocket for cigarettes and matches, and then threw them on to the bed. Mug, he was thinking as he stared at Jackson. Running out of the billet before he knew the score. He's deep in it now.

"Thanks," said Jackson. "I was going mad for a fag."

"Got a drink?" belched Dodds.

"You must be joking," Jackson eyed Dodds suspiciously and wondered what he was playing at. Here was the sergeant-major in charge of discipline staggering into his lonely cell in the middle of the night, blind drunk, giving away cigarettes and now enquiring if he had a drink. Fishy, to say the least of it. Very fishy. Must keep my wits about me. Maybe he's queer. He doesn't look queer but you can never tell. If he tries to put the grape-fruit lock on me I'll thump him daft, the silly old nit.

"Move over," said Dodds, as he sat on the bed, swayed, fell over backwards, then righted himself and handed the bottle to Jackson. Wind attacked him again and he belched heartily to clear it. Pal of Jock Cameron's, a pal of mine, he thought. Though this kid can't be too bright or he wouldn't be here. Still, pal of Jock's, a pal of mine. Have to look after your own. Did a bit of porrage meself when I was a kid, 'fore I learned the ropes.

Jackson took a long swig from the bottle, and choked. Zibzib, he thought. I promised myself I'd never touch it again and this is a crazy way to drink it, straight out of the bottle. No wonder he doesn't know what day it is. I'll have another gargle. Might help me sleep. Very warming. Maybe old Dodds isn't so bad after all. Decent of him to look in and see how I'm getting on.

"Can't see a fella without a smoke or a drink." Dodds stood up and stared at the bed. "Mattress? Where's bloody mattress?" His knees bent so he decided that he had better sit down on the bed again.

"You chucked it out." Jackson had another swig at the bottle.

"Chucked it out, did I?" Dodds took the bottle from Jackson.

"Yes."

"Can't have that," Dodds went into a coughing fit and lowered the bottle from his lips and stared watery eyed at Jackson. "Can't have you bloody sleeping on bloody springs," he said as he handed the bottle back to Jackson.

"Glad to hear it, Ted. I'm striped like a bloody zebra," said Jackson as he had a drink from the bottle.

"Man's innocent till he's proved guilty," burped Dodds.

"You're right there," agreed Jackson. "And if there's any man innocent, it's me."

"British justice." Dodds raised his voice: "Easy with it. Don't drink the bloody lot." He snatched the bottle out of Jackson's hand. "British justice . . . man's innocent till he's proved guilty."

"The finest in the world," agreed Jackson, doing his best to humour Dodds.

"What happened, Johnnie ole son?" drooled Dodds. "What happened then, eh? What happened?"

"Had a black-out, Ted."

"Ah." Dodds nodded his head slowly. "How come then, eh? How?"

"Don't know," confessed Jackson. "I went into Cairo. Next thing I know Cameron was telling me I'd been AWOL for fourteen days."

"You bastard," said Dodds as he suddenly straightened his back. "AWOL was you? Eighth Army retreating. We need every man, and you go absent. You bastard."

"A black-out," said Jackson. "I just told you."

"Black-out? What's this you're giving?" Dodds' shoulders slumped as he tried to make himself more comfortable on the edge of the bed. "What's this you're giving, eh?"

"I told you. I lost my memory, Ted."

"Ah. Did you?"

"Yes."

"How then? How come, eh?"

"Do you mean why, Ted?"

"OK. Why?"

"Strain," said Jackson.

"Strain," burped Dodds. "How come then?"

"Twelve months in the desert. No leave. I suppose I'm sand happy, Ted."

"Twelve months in bloody desert?"

"Twelve," agreed Jackson. "No bloody leave in twelve months."

"No leave?"

"No."

"How come?"

"Black," said Jackson. "He always had a good reason why I couldn't be spared."

"Lying bastard," said Dodds. "You were back here few bloody weeks ago. Don't come it."

"In transit," protested Jackson. "That wasn't leave and I was only here a week."

"Twelve months in desert," mused Dodds, sitting up straight again on the edge of the bed. "You must be sand happy. Might have a good case."

"So I've been thinking," said Jackson as he lit a cigarette.

"Where bloody mattress, Johnnie?"

"You chucked it out."

"Oh." Dodds wrinkled his brow. "I did that?"

"Yes."

"Might have a case." Dodds took a long drink. "Winters might take into account hardship. Mind, he's a wicked bastard." He stared at the floor. "Can't have you sleeping on springs."

"Let me have my bloody mattress back then, Ted."

"We'll know if you're guilty after court martial. Can't know till then, can we?" Dodds staggered to the door yelling at the top of his voice: "Abdul, where are you, you black bastard? Let's have you, you black image." He turned, swaying on his feet, and looked at Jackson. "I make him sleep in a cupboard under the stairs so's I can always find him. He's a good fella, considering he's

a wog. Abdul," he ranted. "Let's have you at the double, you coal-black bastard."

The door violently burst open. "You," howled a voice. "Get out of there!"

Jackson, startled by this rude awakening, fell out of bed and landed on the floor with a bump. He stared at Sergeant-Major Dodds and tried to collect his scattered wits.

"Bloody prisoner fast asleep in his kip nine o'clock in the morning," shouted Dodds. "Think this is a rest home? Get dressed, you've missed breakfast."

"What the hell's the matter with you?" shouted back Jackson.

Sergeant-Major Dodds inspected the bed. "Sleeping in sheets. Bloody prisoner sleeping in sheets." He threw the sheets and pillow through the open doorway. "Mattress. Prisoner sleeping on a bloody mattress." He heaved the mattress through the open doorway. "You sleep on the springs, you bastard," he shouted as he marched out.

Jackson swore under his breath as he dressed. The bloody zibzib maniac's out of his crazy mind, he thought. I'd be better off in the glasshouse than in his care.

Captain Black had managed to get out of Tobruk with time to spare, and he was now living in reasonable comfort some thirty miles behind El Alamein. A place name that meant absolutely nothing to the troops who were digging in there and trying to reorganise themselves. Captain Black had speedily set up a new bulk issue store near the coast road, and after weeding out a few more black sheep, he now had time on his hands for more pressing matters. One thing that puzzled him was what had happened to Sergeant Wilks and the prisoners' escort. Had they perhaps tried to return to Tobruk and been captured by the enemy—or, and this seemed a more likely possibility, had they taken advantage of the prevailing conditions and decided to enjoy a few weeks in transit

in Cairo? If that were the case, then Sergeant Wilks and the escort would find themselves in serious trouble. But how to solve the mystery? His major problem was that he could not get army co-operation.

When he had sounded out a Royal Signals colonel and politely asked for a message to be sent to NAAFI HQ, requesting news of Sergeant Wilks and the escort, the colonel had stared at him for a long speechless moment, then shouted: "The biggest bloody retreat of the campaign yet. An absolute balls-up, and a complete disaster. Most of our lines of communication absolutely bloody kaput, and you're worried about your bloody sergeant and escort in Cairo, are you? Well, I'm damn well more worried about getting top priority signals through. Clear off, you bloody fool."

The colonel was right to be worried. A new general had flown in. A small, slim gentleman who spoke with a faint lisp but still managed to make his words tell, and was determined to get things done his way. There were already a number of vacant chairs in HQ, and far fewer officers drinking in bars in Cairo, and daily officers were packing their kit in readiness for a spell in the Western desert. GHQ buzzed with the latest rumours regarding the new general, who seemed to have a thing about printing troop instruction leaflets, and many a bet was taken on who would be axed next. The general was determined to chase Rommel out of Africa as speedily as possible, but he was not going to move and chance another failure until he had the troops and all the necessary equipment ready and standing by, and he quickly decreed that NAAFI goods were not necessary equipment.

Shortly after the general made this announcement, Captain Black received a signal, via a despatch rider, to the effect that all NAAFI personnel would in future carry shells and small-arms ammunition to the forward areas in place of beers and spirits. Small quantities of cigarettes were still permitted, plus soap, blanco, brasso, and other similar essentials. The NAAFI personnel in general did not care for this news, but Captain Black was delighted. He felt that it was high time that his men did a little more towards the war effort. To date he had had only one recom-

mentation for a mention in despatches for one of his men. This seeming miracle happened in this way. '

A brigadier had noted, not without some astonishment, a NAAFI mobile canteen steering a somewhat erratic course past his forward troops and heading for the German front line. So he despatched one of his officers who chased after the mobile canteen in a jeep and quickly persuaded the driver and the corporal in charge that they were going in the wrong direction, and after the mobile canteen had opened shop and served the brigadier and his troops, he had made a note of the number of the canteen and had recommended the corporal in charge for a mention in despatches. Captain Black had been very pleased to receive this news, and bitterly disappointed to discover that the hero was Jackson, who had had no idea that he was so far forward and had scurried back to base as speedily as possible. But Captain Black was quite hopeful now that a few more mentions in despatches might come NAAFI's way, if his men would only take a more active part in the war, and transporting shells and small-arms ammunition to the forward areas was at least a start in the right direction.

RSM Hart was even more concerned about the fate of Sergeant Wilks and his escort than Captain Black, and even more desperate for news regarding Taylor, Edwards, O'Neill and the rest of the men. Knowing all about the worst side of human nature as intimately as he did, he was convinced that something had gone wrong and that justice had somehow been made to look foolish, and not for the first time. He had no proof, of course. Only nagging suspicions. Why hadn't Wilks and the escort returned, was a question that worried him every night as he lay in bed. Men don't just get lost, he reasoned, and completely dismissed the thought that they may have been captured by the enemy on their return to the desert. They had their orders. Hand the prisoners in and return to Tobruk with all speed.

All right. Tobruk had fallen, but that piece of interesting news had soon been flashed to Cairo, and more than a week ago things had settled down again and Rommel had come to a halt, so, why weren't they back? They hadn't been captured and they hadn't

returned, so somebody had pulled a fast one. But how? For the life of him RSM Hart could not work it out. I'll give them a few more days, he finally decided, and then I'll see Captain Black and suggest he sends me to Cairo to check on what's happened to them.

Cameron's hobby was making NAAFI officers look even more foolish than God made them. He had managed to beg, borrow, or steal a copy of the King's Rules and Regulations whilst he was in England and had studied it carefully. He had a keen mind and was a stickler for justice, or, to be more precise, justice as he recognised it. What is truth? He had asked himself many times, and had always come up with the same answer. God knows. After a lengthy study of the KRR's he decided that the book had been drawn up, as usual, strongly in favour of authority, and that any man on a charge had very little hope of a square deal, but after more extensive reading it dawned on him that a man armed with sufficient knowledge of the KR's had a reasonable chance of beating the system if he played his cards right, kept his head, thought carefully before he spoke, and stood up stoutly for his rights. The book was basically fair, granted one paragraph often ruled out another, but that could easily be put to one's advantage, and these paras, sub-sections, and amendments interested Cameron very much.

On numerous occasions he had outwitted NAAFI officers. Since most of them knew practically nothing about Rules and Regulations, it had not been very difficult, but it had made him most unpopular. He was suspected of being a Communist, which was a half-truth. For some years he had been interested in the Party, but being a natural rebel at heart he had refused to conform and had quit the Party after one of many heated rows.

Now that his friend Jackson was in trouble, he was determined to help him in any way he could. He had given the matter a great deal of thought first and weighed up the situation from all sides. Jackson was a thief, and that was his only crime as far as Cameron was concerned, and he did not take too serious a view of it anyway. For the rest, Jackson was a rebel, and all the better for it. He had spent the money in bars, brothels, and on any girl he

could get his hands on, so that made him a drunken, no-good, over-sexed young idiot. Well, who was he to judge another human being's weaknesses? Many people would judge Jackson to be a useless article, who wasn't worth helping. That was the trouble with the world today. Too many people sitting in judgement, but blind as bats to their own failings. One thing was certain, Jackson could be relied on to help him out if he were in trouble. Jackson liked bucking authority, and so did any man with a scrap of original thought in his head. Black and Hart were determined to get Jackson by fair means or foul. Not to mention himself, Taylor, Edwards, Hawthorne, O'Neill, and Co. So Jackson could use some help.

After sitting up half the night studying the book, Cameron had decided that the only hope Jackson had was to play on the enemy's weaknesses. There wasn't a hope in hell of getting him off the charges. They had an almost water-tight case against him, but if NAAFI made some of the mistakes that one could reasonably expect them to make out of their sheer ignorance of KRR's, then Jackson was in with a sporting chance. But where to start? An obvious start was Sergeant-Major Dodds.

Cameron had cautiously sounded him out, but it was clear that Dodds was not interested in Jackson's fate, and the last thing that he was prepared to do was take any chances on Jackson's behalf. Cameron was not the least bit surprised to learn this. Most people would act in exactly the same way. What could one expect from Dodds, anyway? He did not want to use Dodds but he could not see any other way out. He would have to play on his weaknesses. Dodds was a vain man who strutted about wearing medal ribbons from the First World War and he always relied on bluff to keep himself out of trouble. He had convinced Colonel Fellows that he was an Old Contemptible and had been made up to the rank of sergeant-major on the strength of it, but Cameron suspected that Dodds had not been in the First World War, and that he had only the haziest knowledge of the KRR's.

Granted, he could quote the odd para, or sub-section, and shout loud enough to convince most people that he knew all the ropes,

but, Cameron could spot a phoney a mile off, and he knew that Dodds could be depended on to make enough mistakes to help Jackson's case more than a little.

Cameron entered Jackson's cell carrying a battered old tray. "Thought you'd be able to go some breakfast," he said cheerfully.

Jackson placed the tray on the chair and sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the slimy eggs and baked beans. "For the last fortnight I've been living in the lap of luxury, Jock. Steaks and champagne for breakfast, served in bed by an Eastern maiden."

"Aye, well all fairy stories come to an end," said Cameron.

"I had a different bint every night," Jackson boasted, "and I let you talk me into handing myself in. I should have stayed absent and taken up poncing for a living."

"You'd do well at that," smiled Cameron. "If it was your brains you carried below your belt you'd be a world-shaking genius, but you're back now so make the best of it."

"Dodds has gone crazy. Can't you calm him down, Jock?"

"Maybe he'll calm down in his own sweet time. Did he happen to mention that you're on defaulters' parade this morning, Johnnie?"

"Who the hell cares," Jackson viciously dug his fork into his egg.

"If it's slipped his mind..." Cameron looked thoughtful. "It's well known his hangovers crucify him, but I fancy he'll remember to run you in to see Major Winters."

Jackson swilled down a mouthful of baked beans with tea. The thought that he would soon be doubled in to see Major Winters and charged with just about every crime in the book did not trouble him in the slightest. He was feeling far too depressed to care what happened to him. "What's the programme after I've seen Winters, Jock?"

"Well," Cameron scratched his chin. "You're entitled to an hour's exercise every morning, but at all times you've got to have an escort with you."

"A guard, twenty-four hours round the clock. I know," Jackson pushed his food away.

"That's so," Cameron agreed. "Where's your escort?"

"Dodds just dumped me in here and..." Jackson stopped speaking and stared at the open door then looked at Cameron. "I thought the door was locked."

Cameron nodded his head and smiled. "I didn't count on him being so careless."

"He knows I'm broke. Anyway, where would I go?"

"That's no' the point, Johnnie. You're supposed to be under close arrest so he leaves the door open and canna' be even bothered to guard you. That's two slip-ups bloody Sergeant-Major Dodds has made already."

Jackson's eyes sparkled. "If that came out at the court martial..." He stared at Cameron who smiled and nodded his head again. "I'd be dropping him in it, wouldn't I?"

"Aye. You would."

Jackson continued staring at Cameron, hoping for further encouragement. He did not want to get Dodds into trouble. Drunk, he was a good old skin, but sober he behaved like an absolute bastard. His conscience was wrestling with the two entirely different Dodds. A Jekyll and Hyde character if ever there was one. "I'll keep it in mind," he finally said. "If he keeps giving me hell, I'll fix him. I don't want to, but this looks to me like a case of dog eat dog. Pity he's so kind hearted when he's out of his mind."

"That's so. We always hate the ones we love," said Cameron with a straight face. "Now, the next move is interesting. You'll be guarded twenty-four hours round the clock and I've volunteered for the job."

It did not sink in for a moment, then Jackson stared incredulously at Cameron and started laughing.

Abdul struggled into the room dragging the head and foot of a bed, and leaned the parts against the wall, then, throwing an awful grin at Jackson, he trotted out again and returned with the bedspring and began setting up the bed.

"I'll fix that, Abdul. Take a walk," said Cameron.

Abdul smiled again and trotted out of the room.

Jackson lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully at Cameron.

"I'll be with you, Johnnie, day and night, right up until the time you stand trial," smiled Cameron.

Jackson laughed again. "You won't get away with it, Jock. Old Dodds . . ."

"Dodds is as phoney as the ribbons on his chest," smiled Cameron. "He was never in the last war and doesn't know the first thing about the KR's. He's a prize bullshitter who plays everything by ear and trades on Winters' bloody ignorance, whose knowledge of Army Rules and Regs, as you know, wouldn't even show on the back of a tuppenny stamp. Now, when did you last draw pay?"

"Pay?" said Jackson, and a glazed look came into his eyes. "Now you must be joking."

"Have you any credits?" enquired Cameron pleasantly.

"Six months' back pay," said Jackson promptly.

"OK, Johnnie. When you're ready, we'll go and collect it."

Jackson howled with laughter, and when he got his breath back, he choked: "Jock, you're crazy. We won't get away with that."

Cameron smiled. "The bloody idiot who pays out at GHQ won't know you're a prisoner and wouldn't think you couldn't draw your pay even if he did know. The beauty about NAAFI is a hell of a lot of bloody lunatics look like soldiers, love playing soldiers, but don't know the first damn thing about the Rules and Regs."

"No one to guard me," mused Jackson. "Then I didn't attend defaulters' parade."

"Dodds will remember to march you in in his own good time," cautioned Cameron. "So don't count on that."

"OK, Jock. But how about being guarded by Sergeant Cameron twenty-four hours round the clock? Do you think that will puzzle the president of the court?"

"Aye, it may well do that, Johnnie."

"Then I draw six months' back pay." Jackson threw back his head and laughed. "It's crazy. Do you think the court will believe it?"

Cameron slowly nodded his head. "They will by the time I've had my say."

"Jock." Jackson suddenly stopped laughing. "What will they do to you?"

"What can they do, Johnnie? I'm only a NAAFI wallah. What the hell do I know about the KR's?"

Sergeant-Major Dodds kicked open the door and staggered into the room and stared at the two empty beds. "Sergeant Cameron," he yelled as he moved towards the door. Cameron and Jackson marched smartly into the room. "Where the hell you been?" demanded Sergeant-Major Dodds.

"Prisoner requested to go to the latrines, sir."

"Did he?" Dodds sat heavily on the bed. "Not giving you any trouble then, eh?"

"No, sir."

"Good." Dodds pulled Cameron down beside him on to the bed and handed him a bottle. "Ted. Call me Ted. Not in the bloody army now, are we? In the bloody NAAFI. Not the same thing at all, is it?"

"It's a piece of cake," agreed Cameron.

"Give the lad a suck of the bottle then," said Dodds, nodding to Jackson. "I wouldn't want to be deprived of a drink if I was in his boots. Be going on a journey, won't he? Be going on a long journey to the glasshouse, won't he? The poor bastard."

"It looks that way," agreed Cameron as he handed the bottle to Jackson.

"You two the last." Dodds turned and looked solemnly at Cameron. "Last in the pack. O'Neill and Hawthorne, Aden." He picked his nose for a moment then pulled out a handkerchief and blew into it violently.

Jackson jumped and spilt some of the zibzib down his chin. "Steady, Ted," he protested. "Don't give us the Last Post."

Dodds ignored him. "Aden," he repeated. "Even the bloody camels go on strike when they're posted there. Paddy O'Neill will survive, he'll be topping himself up day and night, but young

Hawthorne's on the skinny side. I'll give him a month and I bet they send him back by letter post."

"You had to send them all on a journey some place, Ted," said Cameron reasonably.

"True," agreed Dodds. "Wilko and escort, Syria, and I let 'em go half fare." He brooded about this for a moment. "Young Lynch in the glasshouse. That solved a problem for me. Taylor and Edwards, Cyprus." He glanced up. "Sooner we get Jackson in the glasshouse and you on your way, the better."

"They've got to find me guilty first, Ted," said Jackson.

"Find him guilty," chuckled Dodds. "Hear that? You'll be in and out of that court room so fast your feet won't touch, son. Twelve months you reckon, Jock?"

"Aye, if the president of the court's feeling liverish," said Cameron as he winked at Jackson.

"He will be, the bastard," said Dodds cheerfully. "Where did you exercise the prisoner today, Jock?"

"We took a few short steps round the block," said Cameron.

Dodds took the bottle from Jackson and had a drink, then handed the bottle to Cameron. "Enjoy it, Jock. Could be your last for a long time."

"Is that a fact," enquired Cameron.

"You left the billet mid-day and you weren't back by supper time. Trying to drop me in it, Jock?"

"Why would I do that?" smiled Cameron as he handed the bottle back to Dodds.

After a slow, thoughtful drink, Dodds stared at Cameron, but did not reply at once. He had been feeling uneasy all day. When he had discovered that Jackson and Cameron were missing his first impulse had been to put them both on a charge, but he had quickly discarded that idea. Cameron was no fool, so he would have to handle him carefully, and threats were useless. Jock did not scare easily. The obvious thing to do was play along with him. But, Jock must understand that he would not stand for any old nonsense. The chances of the orderly officer, or any officer, looking in and checking on the prisoner were pretty remote, but

if someone did decide to check, then the absence of the prisoner and his escort might take some explaining.

Dodds handed the bottle to Cameron and said: "I want to know all about your movements from here on, Jock. If I don't know where you are, I can't cover you can I?"

"Fair enough," Cameron agreed. "But nobody's going to check on us," then he added pointedly, "except you."

"I still want to know where you are so I can get hold of you, Jock. During the day I can cover you easy enough. It's the evenings and nights I'm worried about."

"OK," smiled Cameron. "I'll keep you in the picture."

"How was it at the races?" enquired Dodds with a wolfish grin.

"The races?" Cameron looked puzzled as he passed the bottle to Jackson.

"See Tony the Greek?" enquired Dodds. "I bet he gave you some winners, and stop looking so puzzled. You was seen there, you dope."

"He wasna' on good form today, Ted," said Cameron cautiously.

"Don't give me that," snorted Dodds. "All the bloody races are fixed."

"The first two weren't," lied Cameron. "Or maybe Tony didn't have the answers. We lost a bomb on the first two races."

"And made it up on the next four, eh, Jock?"

"Aye, we broke even," Cameron grudgingly agreed.

"But you nearly mucked everything up, didn't you?" blustered Dodds. "In future you start steaming back here soon as the last race has paid out, and don't try to pull any more strokes on me, Jock."

"We'll be back in good time, Ted."

"See you are." Dodds stared at Cameron for a long moment, then snapped his fingers. "Well, come on. How much did you say you won?" he leered.

Jackson dropped five pounds on the bed and Cameron reluctantly placed a five pound note next to Jackson's money.

Dodds scooped up the notes and headed for the door. "Hope you do better tomorrow," he burped.

The morning sunshine looked inviting as Cameron and Jackson marched towards the open door. Their plans for the day were firstly to call at the Church of Scotland canteen for a hearty breakfast. Steak, eggs, liver, tomatoes and chips, swilled down with several cups of tea, then a tram ride into Cairo, then a nice cool bar before taking a taxi to the races and a word with Tony the Greek. Jackson was thinking, a prisoner's life is not so bad after all, when Cameron suddenly shouted: "Prisoner, halt. Attention," as he stamped to attention and threw up a smart salute.

Captain Conville looked pleased as he returned the salute. "Stand the prisoner at ease, sergeant."

"Sir," shouted Cameron. "Prisoner, now . . . wait for it. Prisoner, stand at ease."

"Thank you," said Captain Conville as Jackson stamped his boots on the highly polished tiles and smartly placed his arms behind his back. Oh well, he tried to console himself. I don't suppose they know, anyway. Forcing himself to sound casual, he enquired: "Sergeant, where are you and the prisoner going?"

"Taking the prisoner for his morning exercise, sir."

"Jolly good," enthused Captain Conville as he battered a fly to death with his fly whisk. "Have you seen Sergeant-Major Dodds on your travels?" -

Cameron glanced towards Sergeant-Major Dodds' office and noticed that the door was closed, which was rather unusual at this time of the day, then quickly looking away, he said: "I thought I saw him leave the billet a few moments ago, sir."

"Impossible," said Captain Conville, shaking his head. "He's expecting me."

Cameron suspected that Dodds had overslept and he was determined to keep Captain Conville out of his office, which also served as his sleeping quarters. Conville would not be amused to discover Sergeant-Major Dodds, i/c discipline, lying bleary eyed,

and probably still half drunk in his bed at ten a.m. "Perhaps I was mistaken, sir," he said. "He usually inspects the cookhouse at this hour. Down the steps," he added, "and the first door on the right."

Captain Conville stroked his silky, fair moustache. "I'm the orderly officer of the day," he said petulantly, "and I'm supposed to inspect the billet, and Sergeant-Major Dodds is supposed to be damn well waiting in readiness for me." He quickly crossed the hall. "This is his office, isn't it?" Before Cameron could reply he violently opened the door, then halted in his tracks and gasped, "Sergeant-major," and stood rooted to the spot, and Cameron noticed that the back of his neck had suddenly turned a bright red. Although Jackson and Cameron could not see Dodds, they did hear him as he said in a very loud voice: "You mind leaving, sir, while the lady finishes dressing."

Cameron and Jackson bent slightly forward and made faint snorting noises as they desperately tried to control their laughter. They dare not look at each other. This was a truly wonderful moment. A moment to store in their memories. A tale to tell over and over again. Old Dodds. The old ram. Caught at it, and in the billet too.

Captain Conville slammed the door shut behind him and stood in the hall, red faced and embarrassed.

Cameron nudged Jackson, still not daring to look at him. He knew he had to get out. Away from the billet and find a wall to lean on and laugh until he cried. They both marched briskly towards the open front door. "Sergeant," Captain Conville called after them. "Come back here."

Cameron and Jackson stood in the open doorway and stared at the small neglected garden and willed themselves to think about anything but Dodds. They could feel their shoulders shaking and tears of silent laughter welled up in their eyes. They still deliberately averted their eyes from each other. Then slowly, reluctantly, they walked back to Captain Conville, and by the time they reached him they had their facial muscles under control. Captain

Conville pointed his swagger cane towards the office door. "You will stay here and witness . . ." He stopped speaking then swallowed noisily and drew a deep breath. "In the billet. Sergeant-Major Dodds has brought a woman into the billet." Cameron and Jackson forced themselves not to burst out laughing. "And . . . and," Captain Conville continued, "he's supposed to be in charge of discipline."

Jackson and Cameron were not heeding him or listening to him; they were staring at the office door as it opened, and at a young woman as she walked into the hallway and stared brazenly at Captain Conville. She was a very large young woman with gigantic breasts and she weighed at least eighteen stones, and she was coal black. Her thick purple lips twitched into a smile, showing beautifully formed white teeth, as she stared at the embarrassed Captain Conville. It's getting better every minute, thought Jackson, and made more snorting noises in the back of his throat. God, she's ghastly. Fancy trying to tangle with that. His eyes filled with tears, and he started shaking again.

Sergeant-Major Dodds walked out of his office and carefully closed the door behind him, then he placed his hand on the young woman's elbow and gallantly escorted her to the front door and stood on the steps of the billet, gazing fondly at her gigantic buttocks as they swayed down the garden path. He had no time or respect for Egyptians, but he shared a common weakness with them: he liked his women fat, and the fatter the better. She's bloody lovely, he thought. Wonder she didn't put me out of action. I've got enough battle scars to get me ticket back to Blighty. He about turned and smartly stamped to attention. "Ready to inspect the billet now, sir?"

Captain Conville stared back at Sergeant-Major Dodds' impassive face. His mouth opened and closed, but he could not get a word out for a few moments.

Jackson stared at Dodds in open admiration and Cameron nodded his head in approval. Great, Jackson inwardly gloated. You gorgeous old bastard, you don't know when you're beaten. You

haven't got a chance in hell of beating this rap, but you're certainly having a go. Give it to him, you lovely old ram. He stared with a delighted grin on his face at Dodds, standing stiffly erect, as he balefully glared at Captain Conville, who finally managed to splutter: "You . . . you're on a charge, sergeant-major. You, an old soldier. Have you no morals?"

"No, sir," replied Dodds grimly. "Haven't you ever been to bed with a woman?"

Jackson and Cameron stared delightedly at each other.

"She . . . she's black," shrieked Captain Conville.

Dodds nodded his head and looked thoughtful. "I'm against the colour bar, sir. They all look the same to me when the light's out. Ready to inspect the billet now?"

Cameron gazed at Dodds with deep respect and Jackson gleefully slapped his hands against the cool wall.

"You're under close arrest," shouted Captain Conville. "Go to your room, sergeant-major."

Dodds walked over to Captain Conville and said very quietly: "You bloody little twit . . . Like playing soldiers, do you? I bet you don't even know how to make out a charge sheet."

Captain Conville turned to Cameron: "You heard that, didn't you, sergeant?"

Cameron with his face screwed up as though he were in pain, shook his head. "Sorry, sir, I didn't hear it."

"Sergeant-major," bleated Captain Conville. "Repeat what you just said."

Dodds stood at attention. "I reminded you, sir, that an officer does not reprimand a warrant officer publicly. So, if you've anything further to say to me we'll go to my office."

"I heard that, sir," said Cameron.

Captain Conville glared at Cameron and then marched into the office and Dodds followed him in and slammed the door shut.

Cameron shook his head sadly. "Old Ted's always been too fond of the ladies. I knew they'd be his downfall."

"Come on." Jackson was sobbing with laughter. "Outside . . .

Can't take any more . . . Outside." He staggered towards the open door, bent almost double, and holding his aching sides.

Major Winters had a pretty but very dull wife in England, and three charming children. He always kept a large photograph of his family on his desk. He wrote to his wife, without fail, every week and his wife never caught on that it was always the same letter. It described in some detail all the wonderful things that the major had achieved during the past week. His fantastic successes, but not his failures. He would never confess to failure. He mentioned frequently how he was achieving the almost impossible task of running NAAFI practically single handed. Colonel Fellows, his superior, was sometimes handed a small bouquet. A good chap, keen, could be relied on in an emergency, but it was obvious to Mrs Winters that all the responsibility fell on her dear husband's shoulders, and she was in danger of losing the few friends she had because she would insist on reading the major's letters to them.

Major Winters occasionally mentioned Captain Black in his letters. His wife had had the pleasure of meeting him on two or three occasions in England, and she felt that she had to enquire after his health from time to time. Her husband sometimes replied, stating that Captain Black was still enjoying good health, but never mentioned that he had been keeping a keen eye on him for some time, and had long suspected that he was chasing rather too close on his heels, or that he had been instrumental in getting Captain Black posted out of HQ Cairo to the desert, but he always had a good word to say about him to Colonel Fellows. Good chap, he would say with a hearty laugh. Lacks experience, so, considering, he's doing a pretty good job.

His letters to his wife always ended: Hope you are keeping well, dear, and the children. Thank God you are all away from London and the bombing. Do write and give me all the news. But when his wife replied and included all her latest and most uninteresting news, Major Winters forgot it the moment he tucked her letter away in a drawer in his desk. He was a very busy man,

and like most people in the world he was madly in love with himself.

Major Winters threw down his pen in a temper as he stared at Sergeant-Major Dodds. "What did you say?"

"Can't accept your punishment, sir."

Major Winters glanced at RSM Gold, who stood impassively next to Dodds, then he picked up his pen and examined it as he said: "You won't do any better at a court martial." He wanted to be fair to Dodds, whom he had a sneaking respect for. To date, Dodds was one of the few men whom he had been able to completely rely on. Give him an order and it was carried out. He was a damn fool to be caught in bed in the billet with a woman, and the fact that she was black, he mentally noted, made no damn difference at all. He was a man of the world, wasn't he? And why the hell that bloody fool Conville had to make such a song and dance about it. Some things are better overlooked. Conville's a bit of a cissy, of course. Not much red blood in him, but Dodds had better watch his step. Better not pull the old soldier. He should know I'm being pretty damn reasonable. I'm busting him to the ranks, but he ought to know damn well that, subject to good behaviour, I'll reinstate him again in a couple of months when the stink's died down. For God's sake, it's well known I'm a fair man.

Sergeant-Major Dodds interrupted his thoughts: "You can't reduce me to the ranks, sir," he said with a belligerent look in his eyes.

Major Winters was a quick-tempered man, and he strongly objected to anyone disagreeing with him. "Are you trying to tell me that . . . ?" He paused for a moment then raised his voice. "That I can't reduce you to the ranks?"

"Yes, sir."

Major Winters threw down his pen then grabbed it before it fell off the desk. Another one giving me trouble, he thought. Why the hell won't they get off my back? He twirled the pen between his fingers in an attempt to calm down and relax a little before replying. "Come off it, Dodds. We know better than that, don't we?" As Dodds was about to speak he silenced him with a wave

of his hand and switched on a smile. "All right, I'll humour you. Why can't I reduce you to the ranks?"

"I'm a King's Corporal, sir," Dodds replied firmly. "From the First World War. Made up to King's Corporal, sir, on the field of battle for showing courage beyond the normal call of duty."

Major Winters winced. Christ, he thought, that's a bit strong. He switched his attention to RSM Gold, hoping 'that he would give him a lead, but RSM Gold's face remained impassive. Did he smile for a moment, wondered Major Winters uneasily, or was it only my imagination? Dammit, Gold's an old Regular. He might, at least, try and help out here. He's asking to be posted to the damned desert. Is Dodds trying to pull the wool over my eyes. If so, Gold ought to tip me the wink.

RSM Gold had served twenty-one years in the army and had reached the rank of sergeant-major. He knew every trick in the book and could have been a great asset to Major Winters. The only trouble was that he hated the sight of him. He had weighed up Winters very quickly on their first meeting and decided that he was a knowall who knew nothing. If Winters had been honest Gold would have gone out of his way to steer him out of trouble, but Winters was incapable of being honest with others. He had a slick salesman's mentality and was always over-selling himself. Gold hated phoney, and as far as he was concerned Winters, seated at his desk, dealing out justice, was the biggest phoney he had ever set eyes on, and the hearty laugh and the hale fellow well met crap, or the violent outbursts, did not impress him in the slightest. How the hell a man could wear major's crowns and be i/c discipline, and know absolutely nothing about Army Rules and Regs, was a mystery that Gold wasn't even interested in trying to solve. And facing him Gold thought, with just the ghost of a smile, is another ace bull artist. King's Corporal Dodds. Good luck to the pair of them and may the best man win. Think I'll put me money on Dodds. He's been at his trade longer than Winters. He stared over Major Winters' head and refused to meet his eyes.

Major Winters switched his attention to Dodds. "I see," he said, as he glanced at his chestful of ribbons. He was not sure about the

first one. DCM, he supposed. Could well be, but he knew the second one, the MM, then the Mons Star and all the tin from the First World War. Surely to God he wouldn't have the nerve to wear that lot if he wasn't entitled to it. "I could easily check on you, Dodds," he said, after a pause. "War Office must have your records. Promoted on the field of battle, you say?"

"Yes, sir," replied Dodds promptly.

"Which battle?"

"Mons, sir."

"Mons, eh? And your regiment?"

"With the Canadian Div, sir."

"The Canadian Div?" Major Winters could not help but feel highly suspicious of Dodds once again.

"That's right, sir. The Canadian Div."

He's looking me straight between the eyes, Major Winters thought. Said that and didn't even bat an eyelid. He switched on a stern expression. "Why the Canadian Div, Dodds?"

"Joined the colours in Canada, sir." Dodds knew better than any man that he was not entitled to the ribbons on his chest, and he did not wear them to boost his ego. His ego had always been in a very healthy state, and he never bragged about his war experiences. He knew that that line could only lead to eventual exposure and derision. He had coldly calculated the worth of the ribbons before buying them and sewing them on to his tunic. They could be a useful short cut to easy promotion and this had proved to be correct, and he was not going to take them down for a mug like Winters and leave himself wide open for an even more serious charge than the one he was on now. He knew that he had no alternative but to face it out and he was pretty sure that he could outsmart Winters if it came to a showdown.

"I see, so you were in Canada?" said Major Winters as he sucked the top of his pen.

"Over there doing a bit of lumberjacking at the time," Dodds replied firmly. "One of the first to enlist, sir. Thought it was my duty to teach the Colonials the meaning of patriotism."

Major Winters stared hard at Dodds' booze-sodden face. The

thinning hair, still dark brown and neatly parted and brushed. The small pencilled, spiv moustache somehow looked out of place on an old war hero's face. He glanced again at the chestful of ribbons and thought, he's too quick off the mark. Too glib. He looks more like a vacuum cleaner salesman than a First World War hero, and God help the poor bloody housewife if he got his toe in the door. Major Winters made an effort to stop his mind wandering. It could be true . . . Surely to God no man in his right mind would wear decorations that he wasn't entitled to. Major Winters brooded for a few moments longer, then finally gave up. "Very well," he said. "You are demoted to the rank of corporal, and consider yourself lucky. March him out, Mister Gold, and show in Mister Hart."

Show in Mister Hart, thought RSM Gold. It wasn't so much the words as the way that they were said that irritated him. I suppose he thinks I'm his butler or something. I'm not even going to try any more. The bloody fool reprimanded me for not knocking Dodds' hat off. He doesn't know anything, and, worse still, he won't learn. He gestured to Dodds. "Outside, corporal," then opened the door and yelled, "Mister Hart. Major Winters wants to have a word with you."

RSM Hart marched in and threw up a splendid salute. It had proved to be a very easy thing to persuade Captain Black to send him to Cairo in search of the missing Sergeant Wilks and the prisoners' escort. Captain Black was as anxious to track them down at RSM Hart was.

"Mister Hart, what can I do for you?" enquired Major Winters.

"I'm here, sir, on Captain Black's instructions," explained RSM Hart. "Two weeks ago Sergeant Wilks was detailed to escort a dozen prisoners from Tobruk to HQ Cairo, and we haven't seen or heard of Wilks and his escort since."

"A dozen prisoners?" Major Winters was startled. "I've heard nothing about this." He crossed the room and opened the door and shouted: "Mister Gold. Come in here, will you," then returned to his chair and sat down and stared at Gold, who was now facing him across the desk. "Why wasn't I informed about the dozen prisoners who were sent back from Tobruk two weeks ago?"

"First I've heard about it, sir," RSM Gold replied.

"Dammit, Mister Gold. A dozen prisoners and their escort just don't get lost. Where the devil are they?"

"Well, let's start by having their names, shall we, sir," said RSM Gold with an edge to his voice.

Major Winters turned an enquiring eye on RSM Hart. "You have their names, I suppose?"

RSM Hart consulted a list that he held in his hand. "Sergeant Cameron and Sergeant Taylor . . ."

RSM Gold quickly interrupted. "Cameron's still in the billet in transit, and Sergeant Taylor's been posted to Cyprus."

"Posted to Cyprus?" Major Winters looked at Gold with his mouth wide open. "What the hell's he doing in Cyprus?"

"As far as I know, sir, he's running a canteen."

"A prisoner?" spluttered Major Winters.

"I wasn't informed that he was a prisoner," said RSM Gold, giving Major Winters a hard look. "I'm not a bloody fool, sir, and I don't make a habit of posting prisoners to sunny little islands."

Major Winters lowered his eyes and thought, it's high time you were posted somewhere. I've had enough of your damned insolence. He glanced up at RSM Hart and said with a sarcastic smile: "Let's have some more names Mister Hart, this is getting interesting."

"Corporal Lynch and Corporal Jackson, sir."

"I can be of some help here," smiled Major Winters. "Lynch is in the glasshouse, and Jackson's in the billet under close arrest awaiting a court martial. Go on, Mister Hart."

"Private O'Neill and Private Hawthorne, sir."

"Both posted to Aden," snapped RSM Gold.

"And you thought they were in transit too, I suppose, Mister Gold?" sneered Major Winters.

I'll tell you your fortune in a minute, thought RSM Gold as he bunched his fists, then slowly opened his hands and placed his thumbs along the seams of his trousers, and, looking above Major

Winters' head, he said: "If Sergeant Wilks escorted prisoners from Tobruk, sir, I was never informed about it."

"All right, Mister Gold," said Major Winters. "Perhaps you can tell me where you posted Sergeant Wilks."

"Sergeant Wilks and two men, sir, were posted to Syria."

"Syria, eh." Major Winters leaned back in his chair. "For a skiing holiday, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know what they'd get up to once they got there, sir," said RSM Gold evenly. "But they're supposed to be taking over a canteen."

"Who else?" Major Winters leaned forward and looked at RSM Hart.

"Privates Edwards, Clarke and Goldstein, Watson, Rogers and Weaver, sir."

"What are these men charged with, Mister Hart?"

"Just about everything in the book, sir," said Hart grimly.

Major Winters held out his hand. "Let me have their documents."

"They were forwarded on in Sergeant Wilks' care, sir."

"And he's been posted to Syria," snapped Major Winters. "So how the hell am I to know what they are charged with?"

"Captain Black has copies, sir."

"It's a pity you didn't bring the copies with you," grunted Major Winters.

"Didn't think it was necessary, sir," bristled RSM Hart. "Me and Captain Black did our job. Charged them and posted them back under escort."

"Of course, Mister Hart. But someone has slipped up, hasn't he?" said Major Winters as he stared at RSM Gold. "I think you'd better give me a full explanation, don't you, Mister Gold?"

"I've told you, sir," said Gold, as he stared at the bald patch on Major Winters' crown. "Nobody informed me that they were prisoners."

"Impossible," shouted Major Winters.

"I'm not in the habit of telling lies," RSM Gold watched a fly

settle on the bald patch on Major Winters' crown. "All the men mentioned reported to the billet, and Sergeant-Major Dodds, Corporal Dodds as he is now, informed me that they were in transit so I instructed him to post them out as quick as possible. This Dodds did and I've his list in my office . . . sir," he added as an after-thought.

• "Dodds, eh?" mused Major Winters. "Then we'll have to have him back here, won't we? And he'd better come up with a first-class explanation."

"Permission to return to the desert, sir, and get copies of the prisoners' crimes?" enquired RSM Hart quickly.

"No, Mister Hart. You will stay here," smiled Major Winters. "Mister Gold will make the journey to the desert and back and this time he'd better see that there aren't any slip-ups."

"There've been no slip-ups yet," said RSM Gold as he stared balefully at Major Winters. "Leastways, not by me."

"You have my orders," snapped Major Winters. "Mister Hart, lay on transport. I want Mister Gold to be on his way as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," beamed RSM Hart, who was only too happy to spend a few weeks in Cairo and help to solve the mystery of the missing prisoners and their escort. He had no objections to a soft bed, clean sheets, a native servant and pleasant evenings in the mess with a glass of whisky in his hand, and when the job was completed and the prisoners were rounded up and sentenced, and he was congratulated on a splendid job, then he would have no objection to returning to the desert and finishing off the monumental task of disciplining the rest of the NAAFI men who had so far escaped his attention.

Major Winters sprang to his feet. "Every one of the prisoners will be returned to HQ as speedily as possible. I'm going to stir things up. I want Dodds in my office at the double. He must be behind all this. Prisoners return under escort, and Dodds . . . Where did you say he posted Sergeant Wilks and the escort?"

"Syria, sir," said Gold between clenched teeth.

"Syria. My God," said Major Winters. "It's Dodds who's behind

this. Must be. Jackson, Cameron and Dodds. We'll have all three of them in for a start."

Ex-Sergeant-Major, now Corporal, Dodds' world was falling about his ears, and he was nerving himself for the final crash. Meanwhile, he quietly and persistently stuck to his story. Sergeant Wilks had not handed him any documents. He was on safe ground there, and Wilks and the escort, if they were prisoners' escorts, had arrived at the billet unarmed. Another strong point in his favour, which he stressed more than once. He was not a mind reader; so how could he tell that the men were prisoners if they did not declare themselves?

He had believed them when they told him that they had been posted to Cairo and were in transit. All the time that Dodds was answering Major Winters' questions he knew that he was making little or no impression on him. The miserable bastard didn't believe a word he said. But he persisted with his lies and would still persist in the face of a thousand hostile witnesses if it came to it, and he would keep on lying even after a court martial had sentenced him because lies came to his lips much more readily than the truth. It was as simple as that.

"Don't lie," shouted Major Winters, who was almost beside himself with fury. He was angry with himself for being such a bad judge of character and now, staring at the boozy face, he wondered how he could have been such a fool. He tried to console himself with the thought that up until now Dodds had been highly efficient and seemingly beyond reproach. Of course, he had heard stories about his drinking, but what a man did when he was off duty was no concern of his. Hell, he was liberal minded and had passed out a few times himself the moment he hit his bed. Nothing wrong with drinking if a man could be on parade and carry out his duties the next day. But Dodds had missed one parade, and there was the black woman, and now this. 'God, what a mess. Colonel Fellows would take a dim view of it. Understatement of the year.

Dodds stared calmly at Major Winters. "I'll go over it again," he said evenly. "Wilks and the rest of them reported, and Wilks didn't hand any of them over to me. No mention of prisoners, no documents. I didn't think about it at the time but Wilks isn't right in the head."

Major Winters slammed his fist on the desk. "Not Wilks. Sergeant Wilks. Let's get that right for a start."

Dodds stared at Major Winters' flushed face. "Yes, sir. Private, acting Sergeant, Wilks and the others."

"Sergeant Wilks," shouted Major Winters.

"You said get things right," said Dodds quietly. "So let's get things right. Private, acting Sergeant, Wilks and . . ."

"You're being bloody impertinent," shouted Major Winters.

Dodds screwed up his face. It's no good, he thought. I'll never talk my way out of this one. They've got on to the best bloody fiddle I've worked in years, they've tumbled me, and unless I can plead insanity or diminished responsibilities, or some other bleeding fantasy, and get away with it, then I'm heading for the last round up in the bloody glasshouse, so why should I take all this crap from this miserable little bleeder. He switched on a wolfish grin. "Don't you speak to me like that, you little shit," he said, "or I'll bloody chin you."

Major Winters gaped at Dodds. "What? What did you say?"

Dodds leaned two large fists on the desk.

"Stand to attention. You're speaking to an officer," shouted RSM Hart.

Dodds turned and pointed a thick thumb in Hart's direction, then turned back to Major Winters. "He must be about the only bleeder in the NAAFI who holds rank," he said. "He's a reject from the Guards, but at least he's a sergeant."

Hart pounded the desk with his swagger cane, his face red with fury. "Regimental Sergeant-Major Hart. Got that. You call me sir."

"Stand to attention, damn you," shouted Major Winters.

Dodds straightened up. "Sergeant-Acting-RSM." He laughed as he stared contemptuously at Major Winters. "And what the bloody

hell are you? Private-Acting-Major. That's a bloody title for you."

"Shut your trap," shouted Winters, completely losing control. "I'll remind you that you're speaking to an officer."

"You don't hold the King's commission," jeered Dodds. "You were a bloody civvy in charge of a bulk issue store when war was declared, so they made you up to sergeant-major."

"Shut up," shouted Winters.

"Stand to attention," shouted RSM Hart.

Dodds ignored the interruption. "So then you did a bit of arse crawling and the next thing they chucked you a couple of pips and you grovelled on the deck and picked them up . . ."

"Shut up!" screamed Winters.

"We've plenty on him now, sir," ranted RSM Hart. "He's dug his own grave."

"And now you're sporting crowns," sneered Dodds. "But you're still only a civvy impersonating an officer."

"I'll chuck everything in the book at him, sir," shouted RSM Hart.

Dodds punched Hart in the belly with all his strength, and as Hart fell with a groan on to his knees, he walked out slamming the door behind him.

10

Major Winters was happy to take to his bed at the end of the very busy day, but he could not sleep. His muscles twitched and his dry throat was not improved by smoking numerous cigarettes. Stubbing out yet another cigarette and lighting another, he gloomily reviewed the day's events. RSM Hart, once he had regained his breath from the hard punch in the stomach inflicted on him by Dodds, had briskly recited all the paras, sub-paras, and sub-sections in the KRR's that could be usefully employed to ensure that Dodds would be detained in prison so long that he would probably die a felon.

Then Hart instructed Major Winters on how to charge Jackson by quoting by heart many more paras, sub-paras, and sections this and that, and sub-sections. The interview proved to be somewhat unrewarding because Jackson stubbornly refused to confess to any of the crimes that he was charged with. He insisted that he was innocent, prone to black-outs, mentally disturbed by the hardships he had suffered in the desert, was totally unaware that he had been absent without leave and, finally, to Major Winters' astonishment, requested to be posted to England to take care of his widowed mother. Clearly, Jackson was either mad or trying to

work his ticket. The latter most probably, but it all added up, as usual, to more trouble for Major Winters, who, somewhat wearily, suggested to RSM Hart that perhaps they should call in a trick cyclist to look at Jackson's head.

Cameron was more forthcoming, but even more tiresome. After a lengthy discussion, RSM Hart reluctantly agreed that the only charge that could be legitimately used against him was that he had struck an NCO of equal rank, but, Cameron stoutly claimed self-defence, and after he had been marched out, RSM Hart had to confess that the case against him was paper thin, and perhaps it might be advisable to drop the charges against him. Matthews had over-stepped the mark when he had searched Cameron's kit in his absence, so, after a lengthy discussion on the possibilities of other charges being substituted, they both finally decided that the intelligent thing to do was to severely reprimand Cameron and leave it at that and concentrate on the other defaulters.

After lunch signals were sent to Aden, Cyprus and Syria, requesting the immediate return, under strict guard, of all the other prisoners. Major Winters had decided to put this plan into operation before informing Colonel Fellows so that he could prove beyond all shadow of doubt that although ghastly blunders had been made by Captain Black, and others, he, at least, was on the ball and putting things to rights with all speed.

Having done all that it was possible to do under the circumstances, Major Winters next called on Colonel Fellows to break the news to him as gently as possible. The interview was a stormy one. Colonel Fellows admired efficiency and abhorred slackness. Efficient officers, and NCOs under his command was the best insurance against having to work himself and as he listened to blunder after blunder, recited in somewhat belligerent tones by Major Winters, his blood pressure went up several points. His suspicion that Major Winters was the wrong man for such an important post as officer in charge of discipline was being proved to be correct. The man was a bluffer and he had better clear up the mess and be damn quick about it. Then he would post him out. Having made up his mind he calmed down and dismissed Winters,

who left his office with an uneasy feeling that he was for the chopper if luck did not come to his aid soon.

A noisy, explosive, violent Dodds joined Jackson in his cell. RSM Hart appointed an armed guard over them with instructions to the commander of the guard that the prisoners were not to be allowed cigarettes, books, alcohol or magazines. The guard commander was only too eager to obey the orders and to pass them on to the relieving guard, but he had not bargained for Dodds' ferocious temper. Broken in rank, but not in spirit, he yelled at the top of his lungs for Abdul, the black image, who finally came to the window and stared fondly at his one-time master, then hurried away to obey his orders and returned later with cigarettes and a bottle of zibzib. When the guard commander protested, Dodds cowed him with a flow of obscene invective until the guard commander finally, and weakly, found himself in the embarrassing position of pleading with a prisoner not to drop him in it. It was the same old story all over again. An ace bull artist winning every round against a nervous, untrained, unsoldierly opponent.

With Cameron once again a free man, Jackson knew that he was assured of a plentiful supply of cigarettes and drink until his and Cameron's money ran out. The future was not exactly rosy, but for the time being he could enjoy reasonable comfort.

The prisoners were returned from Aden, Cyprus and Syria, and were bundled into a large room on the top floor of the billet and placed under close arrest, and one by one RSM Hart interrogated them. He had little or no success with Hawthorne, who, stammering as badly as ever, refused to confess to anything. Aden had proved to be the nearest thing to hell on earth that he had ever encountered, but at least he had kept out of trouble, and now here he was confronted once again with his past crimes, and the hateful face shouting questions at him did not frighten him in the least.

He had decided, as the ship sailed away from Aden, to face up to the fact that he was born to be a bolshie, a dissenter, an unwilling trouble maker. The fates were against him, and that being the case he may as well give up the struggle. With great deliberation, and without anger, he deliberately picked up a chair and smashed it through the window, then, lifting two fingers in the air, he whistled on a high key and turned on his heels and walked out of the office.

Paddy O'Neill was the next man to be interviewed by Hart. After a long, dry sea trip he was too dazed and thirsty to comprehend anything that was said to him. His mind was obsessed with one thought only. How wonderful it would be to be seated at a bar pouring gallons of beautiful, golden liquid down his parched throat. The dump he had so recently left had been as fine a place as anywhere he had set foot on. The terrible heat had given him a great thirst. The voice grated on. Goadng, threatening, jeering. Paddy merely licked his dry lips from time to time and remained mute. Taylor was equally unhelpful. He too was suffering. His eyes darted round the room searching desperately for a bottle. Had there been one he would have quickly snatched it up and run out, but there was no bottle in view, so he stood listening to RSM Hart's voice, smiling wearily, but making no reply.

Edwards, mad with rage at being transported from a sunny little island where beer was plentiful, the cabaret girls pretty and willing and the brandy cheap, was more vocal than the others. He refused to answer any questions and kept shouting for legal aid. In his time he had been grilled by some of the smartest brains in the police force. The bully boys who had shouted abuse at him, and when he wasn't forthcoming, had punched him around the room, and the kind-hearted dicks who had offered him cigarettes, tea and sympathy and good advice . . . he knew all the dodges and he knew his rights. Private Weaver was in hospital and a psychiatrist was taking a great interest in his head. Weaver, under the impression that he was perfectly sane and was working his ticket, was totally unaware that the psychiatrist was convinced that he had a classic case of schizophrenia on his hands.

Edwards, Clarke, Goldstein, Watson and Rogers had been returned to the desert because they had refused to bribe Dodds to arrange a cushy posting and were, for the moment, lost in transit, but RSM Hart was doing his best to track them down. Sergeant Wilks and the prisoners' escort finally came to Hart's rescue and eagerly volunteered all the information they could, and Sergeant Wilks' written statement, which took many hours to compose, proved to be a gem of the very first order. RSM Hart knew when he was on a winner and Sergeant Wilks' statement, sworn on oath before witnesses, was all he needed to beat the biggest shower of villains that it had ever been his misfortune to run into.

He felt very pleased with himself as he marched towards NAAFI HQ.

"I've got it all down, sir. In black and white," gloated RSM Hart. "Sergeant Wilks' statement in his own handwriting, and it makes interesting reading." He noisily cleared his throat and began reading aloud. "This is my statement and the following information I have volunteered is of my own free will. I was appointed by Captain Black, the officer in charge of RASC/EFI personnel, Tobruk, to be the sergeant in charge of an escort to return twelve prisoners to HQ Cairo." RSM Hart stopped reading for a moment and glanced at Major Winters, who sat leaning back in his chair with an unhappy expression on his face. RSM Hart smiled and exposed a row of large, well spaced white teeth that looked like miniature tombstones. "I instructed Sergeant Wilks to write it all down in his own words, sir. I'd like you to understand that, before I go on. With my prompting we would have made a better job of it, of course, but under the circumstances I thought it would look better and be more incriminating, if it didn't sound too official."

Major Winters switched on a pained, protesting expression. "Really, sergeant-major, I think you should choose your words more carefully. It's our job to seek out the truth, not incriminate anyone."

RSM Hart smiled. "Wilks didn't need any help from me, sir. I've got the truth here." He smiled again and continued reading. "The prisoners in my care were as follows: Sergeant Cameron,

Sergeant Taylor, Corporal Lynch, Corporal Jackson, Privates O'Neill, Hawthorne, Edwards, Clarke, Goldstein, Watson, Rogers and Weaver. From Tobruk they were transported to Mersa Matruh and from there by train to Cairo." RSM Hart looked up. "Pretty straightforward so far, sir, but listen to this. On the train the prisoners extracted bottles of spirits that they had hidden in their kits and on their persons and began drinking." Hart stopped reading and glanced at Major Winters. "Bloody prisoners, sir, under escort, getting boozed up."

Major Winters looked suitably disgusted. "Disgraceful," he snorted. "What the hell did Sergeant Wilks and the escort think they were playing at, allowing the prisoners in their care to get drunk."

"Here's the explanation coming up now, sir," said RSM Hart as he rustled the papers. "When I remonstrated with the prisoners they became abusive and threatened me and my escort with physical violence. I am not trying to excuse my subsequent actions, but fearful of what the prisoners would do to me and my escort, I allowed them to drink, and when the prisoners insisted that I and the escort drink with them, to maintain the peace I did so, as did the escort. Private Davis and Private Wells." RSM Hart paused and stared fixedly at Major Winters. "The prisoners threatened the escort with physical violence, sir, and Private Davis and Private Wells corroborate Sergeant Wilks' statement, sir." He placed a sheet of paper on the desk in front of Major Winters and was about to continue reading when Major Winters interrupted him.

"Wasn't the escort damn well armed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why the hell didn't they do something?"

"Fear, sir," grated RSM Hart. "Sergeant Wilks is a yellow-livered, chicken-hearted, useless bastard, and turning King's evidence won't help him if I have any say in the matter. In his place, sir, I would have warned the ringleader and then fired a round over their heads, and if that didn't stop them . . ." He took a deep breath. "Mutiny, sir. An act amounting to mutiny. I would have shot the bastards, sir."

Major Winters nodded his head in agreement. "Of course, and so would any other NCO in his right mind."

"Yes, sir," said RSM Hart, and continued reading. "On arrival at Cairo station the prisoners broke away and entered a bar and continued drinking and refused to leave."

"Why in God's name didn't Sergeant Wilks contact the Military Police?" enquired Major Winters.

"Drunk, sir. Wilks and the escort were as drunk as the bloody prisoners by now. Listen to this," RSM Hart's hands shook as he read on: "Still under threats of violence I and the escort drank with the prisoners and it must have been during our stay in the bar that we mislaid our rifles."

"What?" Major Winters jumped to his feet. "Lost their bloody arms. How?"

"So drunk, sir," snarled RSM Hart, "that they couldn't even keep an eye on their arms. The wogs, sir, pinched their rifles under their noses, and they didn't even know about it, or bloody care. They let the wogs walk in and pinch their rifles." Hart felt an ugly glow burning around his crutch and he had to restrain himself from scratching his private parts.

"Fantastic," croaked Major Winters. "Sergeant Wilks wrote this statement without any prompting from you, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"He must be mad."

RSM Hart smiled. "Mind you sir, I was up half the night questioning him."

"Are you sure this is the truth, Mister Hart? I mean, he won't go back on his word?"

Hart tapped the papers with his fingers. "It's the truth, sir. And it's in his own handwriting, so he can't talk his way out of it."

"Incredible." Major Winters sat down again.

Hart rustled the papers and read on. "I do not clearly recollect returning to the RAŞÇEFI billet, Cairo . . ."

"I think we can take that with a pinch of salt," snorted Major Winters.

"He was drunk, sir. Blind drunk. Didn't know what day it was.

I think we'll have to give him that. Now listen to this. The prisoners escorted me and my escort back to the billet . . ." Hart paused for a moment, then said very deliberately, "The prisoners brought the escort back."

"None of it makes sense." Major Winters stared at RSM Hart with a bewildered expression on his face. "Th's will make the EFI look pretty foolish, won't it?"

"There's worse to come, sir. The next morning . . ." Hart paused and took a deep breath. "... Sergeant-Major Dodds informed me that I and the escort had returned with twelve prisoners who all seemed to be reasonably sober . . ."

"How could they be?" interrupted Major Winters.

"Maybe you don't know them, sir. Taylor, Cameron, Jackson and the rest. All piss-up artists, sir, the lot of them. Drop them in a tank of Guinness and they'd drink it dry and come out looking for more. I've seen them performing in Tobruk. Could hardly get into the billet for the empties."

"Where they'll be going to, sergeant-major, they'll be dry for a damn long time to come."

"So they will be, sir," agreed RSM Hart. "Now where was I? Dodds informed me that I and the escort had returned with twelve prisoners who all seemed to be reasonably sober, but that I and the escort were under the influence of drink." Hart paused again. "Listen to this. Sergeant-Major Dodds then informed me that I and the escort had lost our rifles and that he did not believe that I was the sergeant in charge of an escort returning with prisoners to HQ Cairo. When I protested, he asked me for the prisoners' documents and I then discovered that I had mislaid them."

"Dodds. I knew it," said Major Winters. "He's in on the conspiracy."

"No doubt about it, sir," agreed RSM Hart as he picked up a paper from the desk, "but Private Davis, one of the prisoners' escorts, swears that Sergeant Wilks hadn't got the prisoners' documents when he arrived at the billet."

Major Winters scanned the paper. "I see. So we can't pin that on Dodds."

"No, sir. But we've got plenty on him as you'll see." Hart cleared his throat. "Sergeant-Major Dodds then pointed out to me that I was in very serious trouble. Not only had I mislaid my rifle, lost the prisoners' documents, if they existed, I had also arrived at the billet under the influence of drink. All these constituted very serious charges. At this I got into a panic and asked Sergeant-Major Dodds what did he think I should do. He replied that the best thing I could do was to forget all about it and that for a small consideration, a sum of twenty pounds, he would have me and the escort posted out as quickly as possible."

"In all my experience, I've never heard anything like it," shouted Major Winters.

RSM Hart carefully placed the papers on the desk. "There it is, sir, in black and white."

Major Winters snatched up the papers and read them, muttering all the time. "Good God. Fantastic. Incredible. The damned rogues. Murder. Theft. Corruption." He glanced at RSM Hart. "Dodds was running a racket."

"Yes, sir."

"And you've exposed it. Good show. This is a pretty good day's work. Wait till I present all the facts to Colonel Fellows." Then a gloomy expression crossed his face. "He won't like it. He won't like it one little bit."

"No, sir," said Hart trying to keep the gloating look out of his eyes. "I didn't like it, sir. I was bloody horrified. The deeper I went into it, sir, the more bloody horrified I was."

Major Winters nodded his head in agreement. "Shattering. Bloody well shattering."

"Good men up the front, sir, fighting. Good men dying, sir," growled RSM Hart. "Good men leaving the comforts of home, lousy paid, living under bloody awful conditions, dying for their country, for freedom, and these bastards..."

"Bastards," agreed Major Winters. "Bloody awful bastards."

"Boozed-up, thieving bastards," ranted RSM Hart. "Only concerned about number one. They ain't Englishmen. Gangsters, pimps, spivs, tea leaves. They ain't Englishmen. Fifth column

merchants, working for Hitler. That's what they are. Fifth column merchants working for Hitler."

"You're right, Mister Hart. I'm in complete agreement with you."

"NAAFI wallahs," snarled Hart. "Make me want to vomit. They ain't men."

"Not all of them," protested Major Winters. "Some of them are good chaps."

"Scum of the earth, sir."

"I won't have that." Major Winters began to get annoyed. "We've some good chaps doing a splendid job. The majority are good chaps. You always have a small percentage of black sheep, of course."

"You don't get useless articles like these in the army," Hart replied.

"Then why are the damned glasshouses filled to overflowing?" enquired Major Winters tartly.

"Not in the Guards, sir," growled RSM Hart. "Not in the Brigade of Guards. Men, sir, in the Guards. The cream."

"I'm not arguing about that, Mister Hart. The Guards have a good name. We all know that."

"And they'll be up there again, sir," said RSM Hart, getting carried away by his own eloquence. "Boots polished, spick and span, driving the bloody Jerry back. I feel strong about this, sir. The cream fight and die and the rubbish . . ."

"I know, Mister Hart, I know. I agree with you. Same in the last war. We lost the best men in the last war and we'll lose the best men in this war. But not all NAAFI men are useless bastards. We've some good chaps doing a splendid job."

"Good men, sir," growled RSM Hart. "All the good men are up front, fighting, killing and being killed. NAAFI men, sir, are dodgers. Girls could sell tea and wads. Girls could run a canteen."

"Girls up the front," exploded Major Winters. "You must be out of your mind. You can't put girls in the front line."

"Not the front line, sir. But they could run the canteens."

"And what would happen to them?" shouted Major Winters,

completely losing his temper. "A handful of girls up the front. They'd be raped. Raped by the bloody Guards."

"The Guards, sir. Never," shouted back RSM Hart. "Not the Guards, sir."

"I won't argue," said Major Winters calming down a little. "But don't forget that many of the NAAFI chaps do a good job. They aren't all useless bloody articles."

"Yes, sir." RSM Hart simmered down. "I was hasty, sir, and spoke out of turn. I know they ain't all tarred with the same brush."

"I accept your apology, Mister Hart," Major Winters relaxed a little and leaned back in his chair, "and you've done a damn good job and I'll see that it's mentioned in the right quarters. Now, I'd better have a word with Colonel Fellows, so report back here..." he glanced at his watch, "at 1700 hours. I imagine that the colonel will have to give this very serious thought before he decides exactly what measures to take."

"Pretty straightforward, sir, if you ask me. Court martial the lot of them. In the last war, sir, they'd have been tied to a post with a bandage over their eyes, and shot."

"I admire your keenness, Mister Hart, you've got a water-tight case against the men, but from here on I think we can leave it to the court martial to decide a fitting punishment for them, and don't forget," added Major Winters as he walked out of the room, "I want you back here at 1700 hours."

Sergeant Wilks lay on his bed with his face turned towards the wall. The rest of the prisoners played cards, read magazines, or stared blankly at the ceiling. All except Dodds, who sat on the next bed to Wilks and stared fixedly at his turned back. "He dropped his bottle," he said for the hundredth time to no one in particular. "He dropped his bleedin' bottle."

Wilks moved restlessly on the bed.

"Incriminated me," said Dodds. "Sod a bloke who passes the can."

"You dropped me in it," muttered Wilks. "All of you dropped me in it."

"You dropped your bottle," jeered Dodds. "Poor old Wilko dropped his bottle."

"You lot dropped me in it," whined Wilks. "I treated all of you fair."

"A useless article like Hart put the fear of death up him," jeered Dodds. "So he dropped us all, but me in particular. Turn King's evidence you crawl arse, would you?"

Wilks sat up on his bed. "Leave me alone."

"Leave me alone," jeered Dodds. "How old are you, Wilko?"

"Thirty," sulked Wilks.

"Be ninety when you come out."

"You'll be a lot older," shouted Wilks showing some spirit.

"If I go in, yeah," agreed Dodds.

"You will. You'll go in."

"I've been in Wilko. Done some porridge in my day. You been in, Wilko?"

"Aw, shut up," whined Wilks.

"Every day I'll bash you into a brick wall, Wilko boy. Every bleedin' day."

"Give over, Ted," said Edwards. "I'm trying to think."

"All right, Master Mind," said Dodds. "Give us the plan. How are you going to get us all off the hook? Now you tell us the plan."

"I'm puzzling over it," said Edwards.

"I'm in the clear," said Jackson. "I'm sorry about you poor sods, though."

"He's in the clear," jeered Dodds. "You'll get life, you loony boy. Life. Know what's going to happen?"

"When I come up in front of the beak you mean?" enquired Jackson pleasantly.

"Yeah. When you face the court martial. One colonel, two majors and two captains. Five of the blackest hearted bastards who've ever shared the same table. Know what they'll award you, Johnnie?" said Dodds.

"Two Wrens and an ATS bint I hope," said Jackson. "And a posting home on passionate grounds."

"The glasshouse," jeered Dodds. "And you don't meet bints there, not even in your dreams. You're knackered."

"Shut up," shouted Wilks. "Why don't you shut up!"

"I've got a water-tight case," said Jackson. "I'm going to prove that Hart's a megalomaniac and that Black's a practising queer who only put me on a charge because I wouldn't drop them for him."

"H... h... h... how?" enquired Hawthorne eagerly, clutching at any straw.

"By putting Hart in the witness box," said Jackson. "They'll soon catch on he's crazy."

"W... what ab... about Black, th... th... though?" enquired Hawthorne.

"I'll drop them," said Jackson, "and the bloody Red Caps will have to beat him off me."

"Shut up," howled Wilks. "You're talking daft."

Jackson, feeling bored, lay back on his bed and began to compose a letter to Madge. "Darling, I've just been awarded by a court martial the VC and bar for servicing several Egyptian maidens and upholding the good name of the dear old British Army..."

Dodds interrupted Jackson's thoughts. "We'll be transported to England."

"England?" Some of the men sat up on their beds and looked interested.

"Yeah," grinned Dodds. "Then the Scrubs for first offenders."

"Seeing you're not a first offender," said Edwards, "where will you finish up? The Moor?"

"Not if we dock in Capetown or Durban." Dodds turned and looked at the men. "Your only hope is to slip over the side one dark night. Those bloody Boers are always on the look out for cheap labour, so you trek up country and they'll welcome you with open arms. Do a spell on a farm, show willing, and they wouldn't give you away. They hate the bloody British government."

"It sounds possible," said Edwards. "What do you say to that, Johnnie?"

"They've got to sentence me first," replied Jackson. "Since I'm as innocent as a new-born babe, I expect to get away with it."

"You're crazy." Dodds turned his back on Jackson. "Will you slip over the side with me, Wilks, when we dock at Capetown?"

"Leave me alone," sulked Wilks.

"Trek up country with me, Wilko?"

"Aw, shut up." Wilks turned over on his bed.

"I'll bash you into every bleedin' tree on the way up, Wilko."

"You trying to send me bonkers?" shouted Wilks. "Why don't you shut up."

"You'll be one big, aching, bleedin' bruise if I go in, Wilko. They'll have to give you blood transfusions every Monday and Friday if I go in."

"Why don't you shut up," howled Wilks. "Get off my back, will you."

"He dropped his bottle. Poor old Wilko dropped his bottle."

"Sportsman," said Taylor who was lying on his bed shivering. "Do put a cork in it."

"You're shaking apart, Mike. I can see that," said Dodds.

"You're giving me a headache, Ted."

"Like me to send out for a bottle of Scotch, Mike?"

Edwards sat up on his bed. "Ted, if you don't bleedin' well lay off Mike, I'll kick you to death."

"You, Alfie?" jeered Dodds. "Never, lad. Not you."

"I'll kick you to death," repeated Edwards as he lay back on his bed, "if you don't lay off Mike."

"I'm a mate of Mike's as well," said Dodds. "Think I don't know the poor bastard's suffering. How do you think I feel? I like me little bottle as well. I like a little tippie." He turned back to Wilks. "You wouldn't have the guts to slip overboard on a dark night, would you?"

"I can't swim," said Wilks.

"Then I'll push you through the porthole," said Dodds, "and watch you flounder and then go under."

"I was fair to the lot of you," whined Wilks. "You lot dropped me in it. Now leave me alone."

Dodds glanced at the photograph on the orange box standing beside Wilks' bed. "That your girl, old son?"

"That's my wife," sulked Wilks.

"That lovely girl your wife?"

"I've just told you, haven't I. She's my wife."

"That lovely bint with hanging tits, four eyes and legs like beer bottles, your wife?"

"You shut up about my wife," shouted Wilks. "No one insults my wife."

"Legs like quart beer bottles," jeered Dodds. "That horrible looking old bag your wife?"

"Don't insult my wife," shouted Wilks. "You leave her alone."

"You'll never see her again," jeered Dodds. "You'll be in so long you'll never see her again, you lucky bastard. You ought to go down on your hands and knees and give thanks."

"Ted," said Edwards, "you're giving us all a pain in the arse."

"That's why he shopped us," laughed Dodds. "He wanted a life sentence so as he didn't have to go back home to that poor old slag."

Wilks sat up on his bed. "She's my wife, so you leave her alone. She's been a good wife and another word out of you, Dodds, and I'll . . ." His face creased up and his lips trembled. "Hart kept at me all day and half the night. I didn't know what I was saying."

"You wrote it all down, you stupid bastard."

"I didn't know what I was doing, but you don't have to say things like that about my Mary."

"I know you feel bitter about it, Ted," said Edwards, "but leave his wife out of it."

"He's a soft bloody article and he grassed on us, Alfie."

"OK," agreed Edwards, "but shouting won't change anything."

"She's a good girl," said Wilks as he looked lovingly at the photograph of his wife. "There's not another girl in the world like her."

Dodds looked at the photograph and grinned. "You're right there, Wilko. You'd have to go to Mars to find another one like her."

Wilks didn't even hear Dodds' remark. He was gazing at the photograph of his wife with a deep inner sadness and was thinking, there's no one like my Mary in the whole wide world, and she'll wait for me until the end of time if she has to. There's no one like my Mary in all the world. Comforted, he lay on his bed and closed his ears to Dodds' jeers and insults.

Major Winters looked tired and hot as he entered his office, nodded curtly to RSM Hart and threw Wilks' statement on to his desk.

"Well, sir?" enquired RSM Hart after a good pause.

Major Winters sat down abruptly, then picked up a heavy paperweight and toyed with it, then, dropping it with a crash on the desk, he said: "Colonel Fellows refused point blank to take action."

RSM Hart stared at him with his mouth open, and for a moment or two he couldn't speak, then he shook his head vigorously. "No, sir, you must have got it all wrong."

"I assure you, I haven't."

"The statement, sir. That's all the evidence we need. We've got an open and shut case."

"Mister Hart," said Major Winters leaning back in his chair with a superior smile on his lips, "Colonel Fellows and I have discussed the case at great length, and I assure you . . ."

RSM Hart interrupted him. "It can't fail, sir. Take my word for it. I know the KR's backwards and I know how to frame a charge as good as any man. We've got 'em, sir, and it don't matter how much they wriggle."

Major Winters waved an impatient hand. "I know all that."

"Then if you know it, sir, why let them off?" enquired RSM Hart, looking completely bewildered.

"The scandal." Major Winters picked up the statement and scanned it. "We'd never live it down."

RSM Hart rudely interrupted him. "Crimes are crimes, sir." His voice shook with rage. "Crimes can't go unpunished, sir. If

we let these bastards off the hook there'll be no discipline. No way of maintaining discipline. Every dead loss will do any damn thing he likes. They'll all be laughing at us."

Major Winters smiled and shook his head. "I don't think so. Colonel Fellows is going to sack them."

"Sack them?" bellowed RSM Hart. "Give them their bleedin' cards you mean, sir?"

Major Winters nodded his head. "We've no further use for them, have we?"

"Sack them, sir." RSM Hart was still protesting vigorously. "No, sir. That won't answer it."

"In my view I think that's the best way out of our quandary."

RSM Hart slowly paced six steps in front of the desk, turned and paced back. "Give me a moment, sir. That's shattering news, that is. I need to think about this. Sack them." He looked disgusted as he stared at a framed photograph of Major Winters and his wife and small children that stood on the desk. "Sack them," he repeated and shook his head. "Easy way out that is. They'll be laughing."

"I don't think they will," said Major Winters with a smile.

"Laughing," repeated RSM Hart. "Laughing in our faces. Can't you see them laughing as they're escorted to a boat heading for England. Returned home. Think that's the solution, sir? When the word gets round we'll have a bloody great crime wave to deal with. They'll all be clamouring to go home." He stared bleakly at Major Winters. "Did you think of that?"

"We did," said Major Winters as he cleared his throat, "and Colonel Fellows has already been on to the British Consul."

"Has he, sir?" said RSM Hart sarcastically. "I hope they had a nice little cosy chat."

"It will take time, Mister Hart, but I think we have the answer to the problem."

"I'll be very interested to hear more, sir."

"The plan is to put them in the army. Give them their call-up papers. They all come under the National Service Act."

"Of course they do, sir," growled RSM Hart. "But you have to return them to England before you can do that."

"No, Mister Hart," smiled Major Winters. "They will be called to the colours in Egypt."

Hart stared at Winters for a long moment. "In Egypt? You're joking, sir."

"No, Mister Hart."

"You won't get away with it, sir," said RSM Hart as he shook his head. "They ain't wogs."

"They're British subjects. You may not be aware that British subjects resident in Egypt are liable to be called up."

"I know all about that, sir," said RSM Hart. "All British subjects, anyone entitled to a British passport, Maltese, Cypriots, any of that lot, can be called to the colours. I'm well informed, sir, on these matters."

"Good," smiled Major Winters. "Glad to hear it."

"But these men ain't residents of Egypt," protested RSM Hart. "So it won't wash. NAAFI shipped them over here and it's NAAFI's job to ship them home again."

Major Winters nodded his head briefly in agreement. "We are going into the matter thoroughly," he said with a vague wave of his hand.

"The Consul won't back you, sir. Can't see him getting involved in this."

"We rather think he will," said Major Winters.

RSM Hart still looked puzzled. "So the idea is to discharge them over here, then call them to the colours under the National Service Act. Give them basic training, and then what?"

Major Winters smiled. "The Infantry can use men. The Tank Corps can use men."

A delighted smile spread across RSM Hart's face. "Infantry, eh, sir?" he chuckled. "Tank Corps. Put 'em in fighting regiments, eh? Make the bleeders fight. Oh yes, sir, that's the answer. When word gets round that the naughty boys are being transferred to fighting regiments, we'll have no more trouble, I can promise you that. Quiet as lambs they'll be. Quiet as bleedin' little lambs, sir."

"So we thought," chuckled Major Winters, "and do you know, the more I think about it the more attractive the plan appears to be."

"It's beautiful, sir," agreed RSM Hart. "A stroke of genius." Then he paused for a moment. "If we get away with it," he added.

"We think that the Consul will agree to it."

"He'd better, sir. If we slip up on this then we may as well close shop. Why, every NAAFI wallah in the Middle East, Far East, and all points of the compass will down tools and demand to be posted back home."

"Quite. But I think we have the answer," murmured Major Winters.

"I think maybe you have, sir," grinned RSM Hart as he threw up a very smart salute. "This is a day I always hope to remember." He moved towards the door, then halted. "What about Jackson, sir?"

"Jackson? What about him?"

"He's due to face a court martial in a few days."

"Oh, yes. So he is," said Major Winters with a faint shrug. "Well, under the circumstances I think we will have to forego that."

"No, sir. It's gone too far," protested RSM Hart. "They won't wear you dropping charges at this stage, so suggest we go through with it, sir."

"Well, do you think it's really necessary? I mean, the other men have committed crimes and we won't be charging them," said Major Winters as he crushed a fly to death under the paperweight.

"Keep the rest of them on their toes, sir. Keep them worried."

"That's true," said Major Winters. "You've got a point there."

"Good, sir. I'll push it to the limit. He'll be lucky if he gets less than five years. Shall I give the order to release the other prisoners, sir? We can't keep them under arrest if we aren't going to charge them."

"Yes, do that, Mister Hart; keep them all in transit."

"Except Jackson, sir. This latest move's going to give them something to puzzle over," smiled RSM Hart. "They'll all think

we've gone raving mad, but when they find out what's in store for them..." He started laughing as he opened the door and marched out of Major Winters' office.

"On your feet, Jackson," barked RSM Hart. "This is Captain Smithers, your defending officer."

"Who?" enquired Jackson.

"Your defending officer, and stand up straight."

Jackson straightened his shoulders. "I thought that I could choose my own defending officer, sir."

RSM Hart smiled and screwed up his eyes as he glanced at Captain Smithers standing near the door. Smithers was staring thoughtfully at Jackson. "You've seen two and turned them both down," smiled RSM Hart. "So you'll take Captain Smithers and like it." Opening the door, he added: "I'll be outside if you want me, sir, and don't take any of his old nonsense." He awarded Captain Smithers an encouraging smile and threw up a smart salute and marched out.

There was a long pause whilst Captain Smithers stared into Jackson's handsome, open face and thought, he looks a perfectly reasonable decent sort of chap. I'll pay careful attention to his accent. For reasons that he could not completely fathom, a man's accent could make a tremendous difference to his final summary of a man's character, or lack of character. He vaguely reasoned that anyone with a ghastly, cockney accent could not be very bright. Anyone could learn to speak King's English if they cared to put their minds to it. There was simply no excuse for a cockney accent, or a north country accent, or Welsh, possibly the most ghastly of them all. Could be singing hymns for all he knew. The Highland Scottish accent wasn't too bad. But Glasgow, bloody awful, and the Geordies, shocking, and the Irish. Too much sentimental rubbish spoken about the Irish. They all had bloody awful accents. Everyone should speak King's English. Help make life much more pleasant. Switching on a friendly smile, he said: "Sit down, corporal. No need to be formal."

Jackson returned the friendly smile. "Thank you, sir," he said as he sat down at the table, and crossed his legs as he stared at Captain Smithers, taking in the thin, narrow shoulders, the thick spectacles, the silver blond hair going thin at the crown. The eyes behind the spectacles were bright. Somebody's made a mistake, Jackson thought. I think they've sent an Intelligence Officer to defend me.

"Do you smoke, corporal?" Captain Smithers threw a packet of cigarettes on to the table, and, helping himself to one, he held out a lighted match for Jackson, then applied the match to his own cigarette. Glancing at his brief-case, he opened it carefully and neatly arranged the papers on the table and quickly scanned them. Then, clearing his throat he said: "I'll give the crimes you're charged with as briefly as possible. Theft, one hundred and forty-three pounds. AWOL. Drunk and disorderly conduct. Using abusive language. Refusal to obey orders, and impersonating an officer." Captain Smithers frowned. Damn silly to do, that, if it's true. Why does a fellow want to trot around Cairo impersonating an officer? He glanced at Jackson. "Pretty serious charges, if they're true."

Jackson inhaled and blew smoke down his nostrils as he stared at Captain Smithers. The first defending officer that he had been offered had been Lieutenant Barnes, a NAAFI man, who wasn't a bad chap. The major problem was that like most of the other NAAFI wallahs, he knew practically nothing about the KR's and his opening remarks had not been any too promising: "Caught up with you at last have they, Jackson?" he had said cheerfully. "I always knew that it was you who pinched that crate of whisky; the only trouble was that I couldn't pin it on you. You buried it somewhere in the desert, didn't you? Well, may as well forget that. You seem to be deep in it this time, but not to worry. I'll do my best for you." After that Jackson had politely, but firmly, turned down Lieutenant Barnes on the grounds that he was prejudiced. Barnes had quite cheerfully accepted Jackson's verdict. He really did not want the job anyway. It would incur an awful lot of swotting up the KRR's and he had better things to do with his time.

The second defending officer had been an infantry captain, who had told Jackson, quite frankly, that he did not think that he had a hope in hell of beating the charges. So Jackson had turned him down on the grounds that he was defeatist from the start. This one looks more hopeful, Jackson thought as he watched the smoke blowing towards Captain Smithers. Filthy habit, one of these days I'm going to give it up. Have to soon, anyway, if they bung me in the glasshouse. Why did they let all the others off the hook? Funny that. Hart really must have it in for me. Now how am I going to handle this chap? He leaned forward with a charming smile. "Not guilty, sir. On all charges."

Captain Smithers was still trying to weigh up Jackson. Pleasant voice. Not public school, hard to place. Good appearance. That should be in his favour. Sounds sincere, but why are all these charges stacked against him? Just doesn't make sense. AWOL for a start. How does a man get charged with being AWOL if he hasn't been absent? Or theft? If money isn't missing? Smithers was an artillery officer, but owing to his bad sight he was always given a base job and this annoyed him. He felt that he really wasn't doing his bit for the war effort.

Cairo bored him. He had seen all there was to be seen, and he hated the small talk and the silly parties. He was not at his best holding a cup of tea and trying to make light conversation, and he was even more out of his depth holding a glass of whisky. Drink went quickly to his head and made him say foolish things. He was basically shy and something of an introvert, and the work entrusted to him bored him stiff. He knew that an office boy could do his job. It was a sheer waste of his natural talents keeping him in a base job.

He hoped that acting as Jackson's defending officer might prove to be a little more rewarding. Law interested him and he was avidly studying the KRR's. Time was not on his side, but he would put up the best show that he could. He was honest enough to confess to himself that he did not really care if Jackson was guilty or not. He would jolly soon find out anyway. Being a kind-hearted man, he loathed asking people personal questions in case he hurt

their feelings, but if he was going to help this blighter he must answer truthfully. He began to barrage Jackson with questions and did not wait for his replies. "Are you telling me you weren't AWOL? Or drunk and disorderly? That you did not use abusive language? Did not steal one hundred and forty-three pounds? Did not impersonate an officer in Cairo? Think before you answer, Jackson, and think very carefully. I can only help you if you are truthful. Are you saying that these are trumped-up charges? If so, who is guilty and why?"

Jackson lit another cigarette, and leaning forward, he spoke quietly for a good half hour. He explained that eleven other men had been returned to Cairo, charged with about everything in the book, and suddenly they had all been released, and the charges dropped. Why? It was clear that someone had it in for him, wasn't it? Making him the scapegoat. Could there possibly be any other explanation?

Of course he had not stolen a hundred and forty-three pounds, and Captain Black would have a hard job to prove it. Drunk and disorderly? There had been some trouble in Tobruk, but he wasn't giving any names. It wasn't his intention to drop anyone else in it, but he personally had not made any trouble. If anyone made any trouble it was RSM Hart. Ask anybody. Hart was a bloody sadist and well round the bend, and he had never used abusive language to Captain Black or Hart, or refused to obey orders. Orders were made to be obeyed, for God's sake, and who dared to say that he had been running around Cairo disguised as an officer? Only a maniac would try to pull that one. What joy would anyone get out of trying to impersonate an officer? Private Green saw him, did he? Well, he's a fat slob, and a liar and why, if Green saw him, didn't he pass on the good news to a Red Cap and have him arrested on the spot? No Red Caps about? You must be joking, sir. Cairo is lousy with Red Caps. You can't walk two paces without tripping over one. There's more Red Caps in Cairo than fighting men up the front.

He had witnesses to prove that he had not been drunk and disorderly, or refused to obey orders and so on. Who? Why, Sergeant

Cameron, of course. Other witnesses? Well, there was Hawthorne, Weaver and O'Neill, only don't bother to call Hawthorne, he stutters and no one will make any sense of his evidence, and O'Neill was dead drunk at the time and probably didn't remember anything and it's a pity about old Weaver, but he's in the loony bin.

Captain Smithers gave up trying to ask leading questions. Jackson's words poured over him and he finally contented himself with watching the changing expressions flit across Jackson's face. Indignation, sorrow, bitterness, puzzlement. He turned away and stared glumly at the wall. He had made a fresh assessment of Jackson's character. This chap's looks are deceiving, he thought. For once my first impression was wrong. Captain Smithers was always changing his mind. He's an awfully tricky chap and needs watching. I want to be fair to him, of course, and I'll do my best to prove his innocence, but I'll need his help. For some odd reason he seems to be antagonistic towards me. There's no gratitude in this world, I know, but I'll work my guts out for him. Taking his spite out on me isn't going to help matters. He lowered his eyes and stared at the papers on the table. "You do me less than justice, Jackson," he said with a note of self pity in his voice.

Jackson stopped speaking and stared at Captain Smithers. What's he on about, he wondered. Does he think I've been trying to have a go at him? I'm only trying to put him in the picture and let him see what we're up against. I hope that this one's looks aren't deceiving. High forehead, bad sight, thick specs. He looks as if he's in the genius class. Don't let me find out that I'm landed with another idiot, please. I know my trouble. I turned cynic much too early in life. No faith in human nature, but he looks so intelligent I can't quite believe that he's a complete bloody fool. Be patient. I've probably oversold myself. He hardly believes a word I've said, so he can't be a complete bloody idiot. Pity the old half-English, half-Turkish major was posted to Palestine. A clever crook like him would have puzzled the prosecution, and the court, and got me off, no trouble at all. No use thinking about that. I've got Smithers, so I had better make the best of him. Captain Smithers

interrupted his thoughts. "I will help you, Jackson, if it's humanly possible. I will prove beyond a shadow of doubt that you are innocent of the charges." He paused to light a cigarette, and added as an afterthought, "If you are innocent."

"I am innocent," said Jackson.

"What about this charge?" Captain Smithers glanced down at the papers on the table. "Absent without leave."

"Ah," said Jackson as he stared thoughtfully at Captain Smithers.

"Are you guilty?"

"That one's rather debatable," said Jackson. "I haven't fully made up my mind about it."

Captain Smithers felt a momentary sense of guilt. I shouldn't be trying to get this man off the charges, he thought. He's guilty, and anyone will have a hard job to prove otherwise, but if I can it will be quite a feather in my cap. The court won't like it, of course, but I'll earn their respect at least, and if the word gets round that I'm pretty hot stuff as a defending officer I'll have a job to do that will interest me. Captain Smithers secretly longed to conform and be accepted. How nice to be able to say the right thing at the right moment. To be accepted by the right people and be admired by the right type of girls. But he was a failure and he knew it. The witty remark turned rancid the moment he uttered it. At any gathering he seemed to be all legs and arms, and he was liable to blunder into furniture and blush for no reason at all. He suspected that everyone laughed at him behind his back, and this infuriated him. God, the standard of conversation at the parties that he had been to was absolutely abysmal. No one discussed anything intelligent or interesting yet they made him feel like a stranded fish. Captain Smithers was fast turning into a rebel without a cause. His eyes wandered from the papers on the table to Jackson as he said: "You are either guilty or not guilty. Now which is it?"

"Well, I was due for a damn sight more than thirteen days' leave," Jackson replied.

"But that's not the point," protested Captain Smithers.

"I know," Jackson looked thoughtful. "I had a black-out. Too

long in the desert you see, sir, but the court will want medical evidence to back that up I suppose, won't they?"

"I should imagine that they will," said Captain Smithers with a sarcastic smile. "You didn't report sick?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I felt perfectly fit, physically, and as I was under close arrest I thought that the vet might decide that I was trying to work my ticket, or something," said Jackson as he helped himself to another cigarette. "They tend to be highly suspicious when a man's on a charge, you know."

"I'm sure they are," smiled Captain Smithers. "Any medical record of black-outs in the past, or nervous disorders?"

"No, sir," replied Jackson cheerfully. "I'm highly nervous, mind. I soon discovered that when the Huns started bombing me."

"You are not alone, Jackson," said Captain Smithers with a chuckle. "I'm afraid that that's one charge that will stick." As he stubbed out his cigarette he thought, the blighter shouldn't get away with it, anyway. Be a complete miscarriage of justice. "Better plead guilty to that one, Jackson."

"But I'm still owed at least a month's leave," Jackson protested. "How can they charge me with taking something that rightfully belongs to me?"

"Leave is a privilege, Jackson. No one is entitled to it."

Jackson shook his head firmly. "Sorry, sir, but I can't go along with that. Some brass hat dreamed up that one. Leave is a privilege. Big joke. Doing us a favour and all that, and I suppose the dear old generals thought that they were doing me a favour when they had me dumped aboard a troop ship, posted to the Middle East and stranded in the middle of a bloody great desert."

"It's not a scrap of use your complaining about the brass hats, Jackson. It's an absolute waste of time."

"I know that you see eye to eye with them, sir," said Jackson patiently. "You're an officer, so you have to, and I'm not blaming them, honestly. They must think that they are doing the right thing and acting correctly, unless they are a shower of phoneys, or

they would draw up another set of Rules and Regs. Anyway, I wouldn't bother to argue the case with them. They must be convinced that they are right. So, leave is a privilege and no one's entitled to it. Someone dreamed it up and all the other top brass wallahs agreed, but I don't happen to agree with them. I don't think that leave is a privilege. I think that I'm entitled to leave and if they won't give it to me then I'm entitled to take it, and as I work it out, not counting the thirteen days that I've just helped myself to, I'm still owed four weeks' leave with full pay and allowances."

"Rules and Regs are made to be obeyed, Jackson, and since it's laid down in black and white that leave is a privilege, then that's the end of the matter and I strongly advise you not to use such an argument as part of your defence."

"I'm not crazy," smiled Jackson. "I couldn't possibly convince them that I might be right, so I would be wasting my time, wouldn't I?"

Jackson's reasonable tone of voice infuriated Captain Smithers, and he wanted to interrupt the quiet flow of words, but Jackson's mad logic interested him. This man's crazy, of course, he thought and found himself listening.

"The top brass think it's right to chuck a rifle and uniform at us. Pack us off overseas, feed us on pig swill, under-pay us, and then tell us to go out and kill Germans," said Jackson in the same reasonable tone of voice. "Seventeen bob a week, less stoppages for blanco, boot polish, a lost pair of socks, or anything else the QM cares to dream up, is pretty lousy pay for killing Germans, don't you think?"

"You're in NAAFI for God's sake," said Captain Smithers, "and you're paid a damn sight more than seventeen bob a week. How many Germans have you killed, anyway?"

"None, as a matter of fact," said Jackson candidly. "That's why I joined NAAFI. I didn't want to come face to face with any of them."

"I'm sure you didn't," sneered Captain Smithers. "Now will

you answer my question: are you guilty or not guilty of being AWOL?"

"Leave it in abeyance for the time being." Jackson was suddenly bored with Captain Smithers.

"I trust that you will have made up your mind before you face the court," said Captain Smithers as he picked up the papers from the table. "Otherwise I will have to put in a plea of guilty." ❧

"No," said Jackson, shaking his head. "I'm the one to decide that."

"You are obviously guilty," said Captain Smithers as he stuffed the papers into his brief-case, "and don't," he hastily added, "give me any more about your damned realities." He moved to the door.

"I won't, sir," smiled Jackson as Captain Smithers opened the door, then closed it noisily. Jackson stopped smiling as he moved to his bed and lay down. Bloody useless, he thought. They've sent me three idiots. I'd defend myself but I know damn all about the KR's, and the prosecuting officer would soon tie me up in knots. I'm pretty sure that I can beat the minor charges, but the AWOL charge is tricky. Absent without leave. What do they mean? I'm still owed at least four weeks' leave, but that doesn't count and because I helped myself to what I'm entitled to they'll find me guilty. It's crazy, and they try and kid us that British justice is the best in the world. That's a giggle. It certainly falls down when it gets contaminated by the army, anyway. I suppose it all depends on Jock's evidence, but I'd better keep that dark for the time being. Call him as a surprise witness at practically the last moment. Jackson closed his eyes.

11

The sun was hot and Jackson sweated and moved his feet restlessly as he waited with his escort outside the court-martial centre, and stared at Captain Smithers' back. Captain Smithers was conversing with a major who looked bored to death as he flicked aimlessly at the air with his fly whisk. Jackson couldn't hear what Captain Smithers was saying, but he got the idea that Smithers wasn't making much headway with the major, or creating much of an impression, or even holding the major's interest. Jackson moved so that he could get a glimpse of Smithers' earnest face, lifted, as he spoke to the bored major who continually flicked the air with his fly whisk and occasionally nodded his head.

"Who's that?" enquired Jackson as he turned back to his escort. A dull looking youth with more muscles than brains, and so much brilliantine on his hair that it had melted in the heat and was running in tiny rivulets down his neck and cheeks. He smells like a brothel-keeper's apprentice, thought Jackson.

"Eh?" The escort didn't even bother to turn his head.

"The chap with Smithers," said Jackson patiently.

"Him?" The escort glanced towards the major. "That's the prosecuting officer and he's dead hot, he is."

For a moment Jackson was too stunned to speak. Why in God's name was Smithers speaking to the prosecuting officer, he wondered. Surely the last chap Smithers would be speaking to is him. "Are you sure?" he enquired as he turned to his escort again.

"'Course I'm sure. He's the daddy of them all, he is. King's Counsel in civvy street. Famous. Had more murderers topped than I've had breakfasts . . . Hey, where are you going?"

Jackson stood a few paces behind Smithers and the major, and was amazed to discover that they were discussing his case. I'm dreaming, thought Jackson. This can't be true. I know that Smithers is a bloody lunatic, but surely he can't be quite as daft as that. "Sir," he said almost choking on the words. "I want a word with you."

Captain Smithers turned. "Oh, Jackson. One moment. I'm just . . ."

Jackson interrupted him. "Dropping me right in it, aren't you?" he said in a loud voice. "You're supposed to be defending me, so why are you discussing my case with him?"

"Calm down, Jackson," snapped Captain Smithers. "This is my first court martial and I'm simply asking Major Quigley's advice regarding one or two of the finer points."

"Like, will I get ten years, or life, or stuck up against a wall and shot," snarled Jackson. "Your first court martial, is it? And I have to be your bloody guinea pig. I might have known. You don't know the first damn thing about law, do you? So you have to ask his advice. Of course, you do. But why the hell do I have to be landed with a twit like you?"

Captain Smithers looked suitably pained and angry at Jackson's unreasonable outburst, and was about to rebuke him when a sergeant-major standing near the door leading to the court room, shouted: "Prisoner and escort. Over here at the double."

"Attention!" shouted Jackson's escort. "Forward double. Left, right, left, right . . ."

"Marvellous," shouted Jackson as he marked time. "That's all I needed, a skinny little tit like you to defend me."

"That the prisoner?" shouted the sergeant-major to the escort.

"Yes, sir," bellowed back the escort.

"Then get him over here at the double. Let's have him!"

"That's all I wanted," shouted Jackson as he doubled towards the court-martial centre. "A prick like you as my defending officer."

"Shut your rat trap," shouted the sergeant-major as he glared at Jackson who was marking time in front of him. "Keep them knees up. Keep 'em up. Making a nice bloody exhibition of yourself, ain't you? Language, eh? Abusing your defending officer, eh, you bloody abortion."

He turned away from Jackson in disgust, and shouted at Captain Smithers: "You could press charges, sir. Using abusive language and I'm your witness."

"Er, no, not really, sergeant-major," called back Captain Smithers, as he hurried over. Then in a quieter voice. "Under the circumstances, I am defending him, you know."

"Abusive language, sir," bristled the sergeant-major. "I wouldn't allow no man, sir, to call me the things he called you."

"I think you owe me an apology, Jackson," said Captain Smithers as he peered at Jackson through his rimless spectacles.

Jackson shook his head violently. Keep calm, he cautioned himself. There was a buzzing in his ears and an empty feeling in his stomach, and his pulse was racing madly. Must keep calm, he cautioned himself again, and had to restrain himself from laughing hysterically, out loud. This wet, soggy, useless article hasn't got the brains he was born with, he thought, as he shot a vicious glance at Captain Smithers who stared back reproachfully at him. Look at him. Leader of men, and he's filled the prosecuting officer in with all the facts, and the prosecuting bird is a King's Counsel, anyway, so he didn't need any help, and now the little twit wants me to apologise for calling him a prick. Well, he is a prick, and I'm supposed to apologise to him.

So this is British justice? It's a farce. I'm charged with about everything except murder. Now, keep calm. Jackson desperately cautioned himself again. Where's your sense of humour? Take some searching to find it today. In the right-hand corner, weighing in at fifteen stones, four pounds, the mad major, champion legal

eagle of Great Britain. In the left-hand corner, weighing in at eight stones two pounds, sopping wet, Captain Smithers, England's champion prize prick. British justice, thought Jackson, with an inward hollow groan. It's a farce. All the cards are stacked against me. My bloke, before he can even start the wheels of justice turning has to ask the prosecuting officer's advice. Marvellous.

The sergeant-major's loud voice interrupted Jackson's thoughts. "Well, are you a dumb mute? Going to apologise?"

Jackson nodded his head, and turned to Captain Smithers, and said with withering contempt: "You're not a prize prick. I am for taking you on."

The sergeant-major glanced at Captain Smithers and thought, the prisoner's right, of course, this Charlie's not worth a light, anyone can see that. The major will tie him up in knots. Well, it's the last case on the books so I'll be finished early today. "Well, sir," he said firmly. "Prisoner's apologised. Shall I march him in?"

"Yes, er, sergeant-major," said Captain Smithers with a nervous smile. "Let's get it over with, shall we?"

"We will, sir," agreed the sergeant-major, "and the sooner the better. Prisoner, why ain't you standing at attention? Now, let's have you. Atten-shun! Saw you move. Can't have that. I want you to create a bloody dust storm when you move. At ease. Slow, very slow, you can do better. Know you can. When you move them appendages the army pays good money to fit boots on, you had better move, lad, or I'll kick 'em from under yer. Right now, this time. Attention! That's better, lad. Forward march, Left, right, left, right . . ."

Jackson, boiling with rage, marched into the court room with his escort marching at his side and the sergeant-major marching behind him shouting orders. "Left, right, left, right, left, right . . . Mark time . . . Keep them knees up . . . up . . . up . . . Keep 'em up. Prisoner and escort, halt! Still . . . stand still."

Seated at a long table facing Jackson were five officers. A colonel had the place of honour in the centre. On both sides of him sat a major. The end chairs were occupied by two captains. Behind him Jackson could hear the military police slamming their

boots hard on the stone floor as they were given orders. From the corner of his eye, Jackson watched Captain Smithers move to a small table and place his brief-case upon it, then the prosecuting officer moved to a small table opposite Captain Smithers and threw a few sheets of paper on to the table, and with his habitual bored expression, he flicked the air with his fly whisk. Jackson concentrated all his attention on the officers at the large table facing him. The colonel was a handsome man in his early fifties, who wore his grey hair at the correct regulation length. On his upper lip a short cropped grey moustache aided the impression that he was a rugged out-door type. Two pale blue eyes stared at Jackson from a deeply tanned, lined face, and Jackson thought, there's no mistaking you. Regular soldier with plenty of service in. Bet you've done the lot. India, Poona, the Khyber Pass, Palestine, Sudan, all over the bloody place.

He quickly scanned the other faces that were staring at him. The major seated on the colonel's right side had a round, florid face and soft, wet, womanish lips that he tried to hide beneath a heavy moustache. The major on the left hand side of the colonel, Jackson was surprised to discover, was faceless. No matter how hard he concentrated on him he could not discover one single feature that made any kind of impression.

The two captains were more to Jackson's taste. The one on the right was watching Jackson with a certain amount of interest, and Jackson had the impression that even so early in the proceedings he was already trying to weigh him up. The one on the left had large humorous eyes, and was smiling faintly as if to put Jackson at his ease. Jackson was sweating profusely by now, and had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and for a fleeting moment he had an almost irresistible urge to blurt out: "I'm guilty. Guilty on all counts, so get it over with." Instead, he ground his teeth together until the muscles stood out in his jaw, straightened his back, and, as the sweat trickled into his eyes, he shook his head and tried desperately hard to think clearly. But only defeatist thoughts raced through his brain.

The colonel glanced away from Jackson, cleared his throat,

then read the charges in a slightly high-pitched voice that did not somehow seem to belong to his rugged out-door exterior. When he had finished he stared fixedly at Jackson and enquired: "Is that quite clear? Do you fully understand the charges?"

Jackson stiffened his shoulders and said in a firm voice: "Yes, sir. I understand the charges."

The colonel nodded his head briefly, then said: "Do you plead guilty, or not guilty?"

A look of complete innocence crept into Jackson's eyes and quickly spread across his face. Two guileless blue eyes stared unflinchingly back at the colonel. "Not guilty, sir. On all counts," said Jackson in a voice that shook faintly yet somehow managed to convey deep sincerity and astonishment that an innocent man should be on trial.

"I see." The colonel glanced along the table at his brother officers and Jackson thought, that didn't go down too badly, but I'll have to soft-pedal it a bit. The colonel stared at Jackson and said, "Now if there is anyone in this court room who you object to, speak up now. Any officer, for example, seated at this table whom you feel for any reason may be prejudiced."

"There is, sir," said Jackson.

The colonel looked surprised as he glanced swiftly at his brother officers. "Oh. Who?"

"Him, sir," said Jackson, pointing an accusing finger at Captain Smithers.

Captain Smithers' face reddened, and he dropped the papers that he was taking out of his brief-case on to the floor, and kneeling down he scrambled them into a heap, protesting all the time. "Really, sir. . . I'm amazed . . . don't understand . . . Really, sir . . . I cannot understand his antagonism . . ." He collected the papers and, straightening up, he petulantly threw them on to the table.

The colonel, with an amazed expression on his face, was still staring at his brother officers, and completely ignoring Captain Smithers. Finally, he stared at Jackson and said: "But . . . Captain Smithers is your defending officer. Don't you understand. Your defending officer."

"That's what I thought, sir," said Jackson earnestly, "and I had every trust in him." Jackson paused and, weighing his words very carefully, and speaking in a clear, firm voice, he said, "until I overheard my defending officer, sir, asking the prosecuting officer's advice on how to handle my case. He was discussing my case with the prosecuting officer, and something tells me, sir, there's already been a miscarriage of justice."

"Sir," pleaded Captain Smithers, who was still desperately sorting through his papers with nervous fingers, "I would like to explain. The prisoner, sir, does me an injustice. The explanation is perfectly simple . . ."

"Then may we have it," snapped the colonel and before Captain Smithers could reply he held up his hand to silence him and turned to the prosecuting officer.

"Major Quigley. What have you to say?"

"Sir," pleaded Captain Smithers.

"I will tell you when to speak." The colonel glared at Captain Smithers then turned again to the prosecuting officer.

The prosecuting officer smiled as he flicked his fly whisk gracefully through the air and said with a faintly sarcastic smile on his lips: "As I'm sure you are fully aware, sir, officers defending prisoners are seldom, if ever, experts on law."

The colonel interrupted the prosecuting officer, "But they know the King's Rules and Regulations backwards, or should do, and in this court we're dealing with army law, not civil law."

The prosecuting officer smiled again. "Sir, few officers have the time or the patience to study the KR's."

"Are you trying to tell me," said the colonel, "that Captain Smithers is not competent to defend this prisoner?"

"I suggest you put the question to the defending officer," the prosecuting officer replied.

"Captain Smithers." The colonel turned in his chair. "What have you to say to that?"

"Sir." Captain Smithers straightened up with an injured expression on his face. "I have studied the KR's at great length and feel that I am more than competent to defend the prisoner. Of course,

sir, I do not profess to have the same knowledge as our learned counsel, but then, sir, law is not my profession. However . . ."

The colonel interrupted him. "That's good enough."

One last try, thought Jackson feeling desperate, but I'm wasting my time. He tried to sound infinitely reasonable as he said: "I'm not trying to be difficult, sir. I don't mind settling for the prosecuting officer defending me and the defending officer prosecuting me."

"That's quite out of the question," snapped the colonel.

"Then I would like to suggest, sir, that I'm granted a defending officer who knows as much about the law as the prosecuting officer, or is asking for a square deal too much to expect?"

The way the colonel frowned, Jackson knew that he had overstepped the mark and suddenly he didn't care any more. He relaxed and thought, I'm dealing with stupid bastards, but all my life I've had to deal with them. The world's overflowing with stupid bastards, and all the best jobs in the world are handed on a plate from one stupid bastard to the next. All the top brass are stupid bastards and all the officers and soldiers who obey their orders are even bigger, sillier bastards than the generals.

Everyone in this court, with the exception of me, is a stupid bastard. Even the prosecuting officer is a stupid bastard. All he knows is a few golden rules about the law and how to drop them so they go off with the right kind of bang. How can anyone survive when ninety-nine-point-ninety-nine per cent of the population of this world are perfect specimens of thoroughly brainwashed, out of touch with reality, stupid bastards? Shall I tell them now? This minute? Shall I tell them they are all a lot of stupid bastards? Steady, Jackson cautioned himself. Don't you join the club. Don't you be a stupid bastard too.

The colonel's chair scraped back as he stood up. "The court will adjourn for ten minutes," he said curtly. "Major Quigley, Captain Smithers, I'd better have a word with you."

It all depends on Jock, thought Jackson, and by the look of things he's going to have some of them here puzzled.

Cameron stood stiffly to attention in the witness box and stared blankly ahead of him at the Union Jack draped on the wall behind the colonel and his brother officers.

Major Quigley, the prosecuting officer, watched Cameron with a thoughtful, and slightly puzzled, expression, then, waving his fly whisk aimlessly in the air, he said: "I think you are lying, Sergeant Cameron."

"No, sir," Cameron replied.

"So you were the prisoner's escort for twenty days. You and you alone?"

"That's right, sir. For twenty days, twenty-four hours round the clock."

The prosecuting officer moved away from Cameron and stared at Captain Smithers and wondered why he had been in such a sweat before the trial had started. Didn't the damn fool know that if the prosecution could not break down this witness's evidence, that there wasn't a case to answer, and that everyone was wasting their time. If this man is speaking the truth, then the whole thing's a damned farce and I'll wash my hands of it, he thought. But he can't be speaking the truth. No sergeant-major in his right mind would appoint an NCO to guard a prisoner for twenty days on the trot. Something very fishy going on here. He noticed that Captain Smithers was leaning forward with a surprised yet keen expression on his face. Taking interest in the proceedings at long last, Major Quigley thought, then pointing an accusing finger at Cameron he suddenly shouted: "How could you guard a prisoner twenty-four hours a day for twenty days?"

"I did my best, sir," Cameron replied calmly.

"Didn't you ever sleep?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"So, you guarded the prisoner whilst you were asleep, did you, Sergeant Cameron?" enquired Major Quigley as he shot a side glance towards the president of the court to see how he reacted to that little piece of information. The president's expression was non-committal as he stared at Cameron and waited for him to reply to the question.

"I told you that I did my best, sir," Cameron said. "I put the prisoner on trust. Made him give me his word of honour that he wouldna' escape."

Major Quigley now turned full face towards the president of the court, fully expecting an interruption, probably a violent one, but the president merely snorted as he picked up some papers from the table and scanned them. I don't believe a word of it, he was thinking. This witness is a fool and a liar. When I sum up I will make a point of discrediting this imbecile's evidence, and if he carries on in this vein I should charge him with perjury, and I may well do that. He dropped the papers on to the table and said: "Strange things seem to be happening in our modern conscript army, eh, gentlemen?"

The officers seated at the table chuckled and nodded their heads in agreement.

Captain Smithers shot anxious glances from the president to Major Quigley, then stared glumly at Cameron. When he had discussed Cameron's evidence, all too briefly as Jackson had only called him at the last moment, he had quickly realised that if his evidence was accepted then he had more than a reasonable chance of winning the case, but now he was less certain. It all sounded so wildly improbable that he was beginning to wish that he had not put Cameron on the stand.

Major Quigley smiled and made a slight bow towards the colonel, then turned to Cameron and said: "We are all terribly interested to learn more about your extraordinary appointment, sergeant. So will you tell me in your own words just exactly what did happen?"

Cameron swivelled his eyes and stared fixedly at the prosecuting officer for a long moment, then said: "Sergeant-Major Dodds, sir, who was in charge of the billet and discipline ordered me to guard the prisoner."

"You alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"But didn't you protest?"

Cameron looked puzzled. "No, sir. If I'm given an order, I obey it."

"Jolly good, sergeant. That's jolly good," said the prosecuting officer with a sneer. "So if Sergeant-Major Dodds told you to shoot yourself, you would, of course."

"No, sir."

"Oh?" smiled the prosecuting officer. "Why ever not?"

Cameron pondered on this question for a few moments then spoke up. "Something tells me, sir, that no one has the right to give me that kind of order."

"Jolly good, sergeant," smiled the prosecuting officer. "You are catching on, aren't you?" Then, wiping the smile from his face, he said: "And are you trying to tell me that you honestly believe that Sergeant-Major Dodds had the right to order you to guard a prisoner twenty-four hours round the clock for twenty days?"

Cameron smiled. "To be honest, sir, I had some doubts about it myself, but Sergeant Major Dodds is a hard man and not the fella I'd want to get on the wrong side of."

The president leaned forward and said: "Are you saying that you were afraid to disobey the order?"

Cameron looked the president square between the eyes. "I'm no' proud to own up to it, sir, but that's the truth."

"You must know your rights, man. You don't have to blindly obey orders. You don't have to go in fear and trembling of a senior NCO. You can appeal to your commander officer."

Cameron lowered his eyes and, speaking a little above a whisper, said: "I hadn't the guts."

"Speak up, sergeant. What did you say?" The president of the court was becoming more and more exasperated with this imbecile facing him.

Cameron held up his head and, looking thoroughly ashamed of himself, he shouted back: "I hadna' the guts, sir."

There was an uneasy silence as the president of the court rustled the papers on the table. The major with the womanish lips and heavy moustache stared at Cameron then quickly looked away. The sergeant-major, standing guard at the door, coughed loudly

as he threw a disgusted look in Cameron's direction. Major Quigley hit out at a fly with his fly whisk, then turned and stared at the president again, but the president ignored him as he still rustled the papers on his table. He did not care to hear a confession like that made in public by an NCO. Jackson was thinking, you poor bastard. I'm making you suffer, Jock, afe'n't I. But I think you're on the right track, so stick it out, old son.

The president of the court pushed the papers to one side as he said: "You're a damned coward, sergeant. Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

Cameron's face turned brick red as he mutely nodded his head as though he were in complete agreement with the president of the court.

The president stared contemptuously at Cameron and said in a loud voice: "Wish I had you in my regiment, sergeant. By God, I'd soon put some backbone into you."

That was too much for Cameron to stomach. A hard look crept into his eyes as he replied: "Am I facing the court, sir, answering charges to cowardice, or am I supposed to be a witness for the defence?"

"Don't be impertinent," the president shouted.

Jackson wanted to shout: Don't Jock, don't lose your rag. Don't muck it up. You're going great. Don't lose your temper and drop me in it.

Cameron glanced towards Jackson and saw the stricken look on his face, and for a moment he hated him. What the hell am I doing here making a public spectacle of myself, he wondered. How many more times do I have to steer the young bastard out of trouble? I never thought I'd have to go through this. There's some things a man shouldn't have to suffer. Then, turning towards the president of the court, and seeing the scorn written so clearly on his face, his sense of humour came to his rescue. This fella's no' the best judge of character, he thought. A smile lit up his eyes for a moment, then was speedily extinguished as he said: "I beg your pardon, sir. I spoke out of turn."

"I accept your apology." The president of the court turned his head and nodded to Major Quigley. "Proceed."

"Thank you, sir. May I suggest that we send for Sergeant-Major Dodds and hear what he has to say."

"I agree," replied the president of the court.

The prosecuting officer turned to Cameron. "I'll give you one last chance, sergeant, and this time I want the truth."

"I've told you the truth, sir."

"I'm sending for Sergeant-Major Dodds. I'm putting him in the witness box. Now think that over for a minute," said the prosecuting officer as he moved away a few paces.

"All right, sir," said Cameron as he screwed up his eyes and switched on a blank, stupid expression.

"Perjury, sergeant. You know that that's a serious offence, don't you?"

"Aye, sir," agreed Cameron. "But I'm speaking the truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

"We'll soon have the answer to that," snapped the prosecuting officer. "I take it that Sergeant-Major Dodds is still stationed in Cairo?"

"Aye sir. He's in the billet."

"Good, we'll send for him." The prosecuting officer turned to the president of the court. "I have your permission, sir, to send for Sergeant-Major Dodds?"

"You have," replied the president.

"Ex-Sergeant-Major Dodds, sir," said Cameron quietly.

The prosecuting officer had lifted his arm to beckon one of the military policemen. Now he lowered it slowly. "What did you say?"

"Ex-Sergeant-Major Dodds, sir," replied Cameron as he willed himself to keep a straight face.

"Oh. Since when?"

"About a week, sir."

"Interesting." The prosecuting officer flicked his fly whisk through the air. "Perhaps you can tell me why Sergeant-Major Dodds has been demoted."

"I can, sir," agreed Cameron.

"Good. We're all waiting."

"He was caught in bed, sir, in the billet, sleeping with a black woman."

There was a deadly silence for a few moments, then the president's face slowly turned purple. The prosecuting officer stared hard at Cameron, then said, after a long pause: "Are you sure he's still in residence at the billet and not in a Field Punishment and Detention Camp?"

"Yes, sir. He's in the billet," replied Cameron.

The prosecuting officer turned to the president of the court. "Private Dodds' evidence will still be admissible, I hope, sir."

"I suppose so," snorted the colonel.

"Corporal Dodds, sir," said Cameron.

The prosecuting officer stared blankly at Cameron. "Are you trying to tell me that Sergeant-Major Dodds was demoted to the rank of corporal after being discovered in the billet having immoral relationship with a black woman?"

"Yes, sir," replied Cameron, looking intensely serious. "He's a King's Corporal, you see, from the First World War, so they couldn't break him to the ranks."

"This man's evidence has been absolutely worthless to date," said the colonel glaring at Cameron. "I'm none too sure that he's right in the head."

"I canna be pure daft, sir," said Cameron with an injured air, "if I'm considered to be responsible enough to guard the prisoner for twenty days on the trot, and, sir, I might add, I cared for him well. I even saw to it that he drew his back pay and credits."

As the president stood up he knocked his chair over. "You saw to it that he drew his back pay?"

"Aye, sir. You see . . ."

"I don't," said the president, who was wondering if Cameron was stark raving mad or not, or possibly his hearing was affected. This idiot. An NCO had just proudly stated that he had allowed a prisoner to draw his back pay. Mad of course. Mad as a March hare, and the man who put him in charge of a prisoner for twenty days. Equally mad. How dare they bring such a case to court. How dare they waste his time. This damn case needs thoroughly

investigating. Highly suspect to say the least of it. "Sergeant Cameron," he said in a flat colourless voice. "What kind of a damn fool are you?"

"Did I do wrong, sir?" enquired Cameron.

The president turned to his brother officers. "This imbecile wonders if he did wrong. I wonder, what army does he think he's in."

"I've wondered that myself, sir," Cameron replied. "I've had no military training, sir, to speak of. Maybe a week's square bashing and saluting on the march. No rifle training. No . . ."

"You're in the Royal Army Service Corps." The president was losing his temper. "And you must have undergone at least six weeks' basic training."

"EFI, sir," said Cameron quietly.

"What?"

"NAAFI, sir."

That answers many questions that have puzzled me, the president thought as he picked up Jackson's crime sheet and scanned it. EFI. NAAFI, of course. Camp followers, damn them. Parasites. "But surely, sergeant, you know something about the KR's. The King's Rules and Regulations. Surely to God . . ." Lost for words, he stared at Cameron.

"I'm a canteen manager, sir," Cameron replied. "Civvy paid."

"But you're wearing King's uniform," the president protested.

"Aye, sir," Cameron agreed. "But I know damn all about the army, sir. All I know is how to run a canteen."

"Let me see the prisoner's pay book," the president said and when the book was passed to him he stared at it in disbelief. "The prisoner did draw his pay," he said in a flat voice. "Never in all my experience . . . the whole thing's a farce." He picked up the papers from the table and in a fury threw them in the air and stamped out of the court room.

Cameron threw a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches on to Jackson's bed. "God knows what the sentence will be. The

president of the court will have to make his report in writing, then it will be subject to confirmation by one of the top brass. If there's any justice they're going to throw the case out, but they may decide they canna' let you get away with it entirely and give you a light sentence just to warm you up."

"They won't give me about five years then?" enquired Jackson.

"Listen," said Cameron. "If they give you a day over a hundred and twelve, you appeal. And keep shouting, and I promise you it will be lightened if they dinna' throw it out altogether."

"I will," Jackson readily agreed. "With a bit of luck I might survive a hundred and twelve days in the glasshouse, but after that I'd be a walking zombi or a bloody corpse."

"Aye," agreed Cameron. "I did a spell in the glasshouse before the war when I was a regular in the Black Watch. I must have been thick, or I never would have joined the bloody army."

"What's it like, Jock?" enquired Jackson anxiously.

"Well," Cameron took a long pull at his cigarette and looked thoughtful. "It all depends on the man that goes in and his attitude towards authority. Now, you can take my case. Soon as I was doubled in and sweated down and had me kit kicked about all over the yard, one of the bloody screws couldna' resist giving broad hints that me mother and father had no' found time to go in search of a preacher before they tumbled into bed. So, after I'd nodded him in the kisser and put two of his mates on the deck, I was doubled to a lonely cell and as fast as I punched one screw out another took his place. Finally, they hit on a bright idea. One fella came at me with a mattress and soon I was pressed against the wall, then I was on the deck with the bloody mattress covering me and suffocating me." Cameron paused and smiled. "Treatment like that in time, Johnnie, takes some of the wind out of your sails."

"So what did you do, Jock?" Jackson was anxious to hear the end of the story.

"Well," smiled Cameron. "Since I couldna' beat and couldna' join them either, I found a middle path, and that's the right one to walk, Johnnie. Say 'Yes, staff, no, staff'. Double when you're

told. Obey orders. Never give lip, never answer back and dinna' give them a chance to fault you. See your kit and equipment's spotless. Obey orders. Grin and bear it. Keep your sense of humour and you'll survive. That's the only way you can beat them. Keep your sense of humour, but for God's sake don't let it show."

"It sounds great," said Jackson with a gloomy shake of his head. "So, while they're punching me daft or smothering me under a mattress I've got to keep my sense of humour, have I?"

Cameron smiled broadly. "They reserve that treatment as a rule for the awkward squad, Johnnie. The punch-up experts like me. The fellers who think they're iron men. The little comics who can't help wagging their foolish tongues. But you're no' an iron man, Johnnie, or a punch-up expert, but you've a smart little head on your shoulders, so use it to keep you out of trouble."

RSM Hart's voice could be heard from the corridor shouting drill orders "Mark time. Keep them knees up. Keep 'em up. Forward march, and bloody well keep in step. In step, mark time."

Cameron motioned to Jackson to stand and moved towards the door. Before he reached it the door was violently kicked open and RSM Hart entered. Then, turning, he bawled: "Forward march." A sergeant and two armed private soldiers marched into the cell. "Halt!" shouted RSM Hart. "Still. Stand still. Right, stand at ease. Easy. Take off your kit." The men obeyed the orders and RSM Hart turned and glared at Cameron. "You the long service prisoners' escort, sergeant?"

"Aye, sir," said Cameron as he stamped to attention.

"Prisoner, stand to attention," shouted RSM Hart.

Jackson stamped to attention.

RSM Hart stared at Jackson with a look of disgust on his face, then concentrated all his attention on Cameron. "And what are you doing here, sergeant?"

"Saying goodbye to Jackson, sir," replied Cameron coolly. "I fancy he's going on a trip."

"Not your fault if he is, sergeant, eh? Not your fault," said RSM Hart. "You did well by the lad. Pulled about every trick in

the book, didn't you? But you wouldn't have got away with it if I'd been in charge here."

"I only obeyed Sergeant-Major Dodds' orders, sir," said Cameron with a hint of a smile in his eyes.

"Your days are numbered, Cameron," blustered RSM Hart as he turned to Jackson, "and you'll find a few changes. Try to make fools of the army, would you?"

"We didna' need any help, sir," smiled Cameron.

RSM Hart pointed his cane towards the door. "Outside, Sergeant Cameron. Move!"

Cameron threw an encouraging smile in Jackson's direction and smartly marched out of the room.

RSM Hart turned to the sergeant of the guard. "See the prisoner cleans up his cell and lays out his kit correctly. Keep him on the move. Keep him busy. Keep him so bloody busy he's got no time to think. I was in the Guards. The Guards, so I know a few tricks." He turned to Jackson. "So don't try and baffle me with science. Stand up straight!" Jackson straightened his shoulders. "I'm going to climb on your back, lad, and I'm going to stay there on your aching back. You're gonna learn about discipline. You NAAFI wallahs are nothing more than a shower of piss pots. Clever little tea leaves, straight out of the nick and straight into a NAAFI till. I've got my sights on a few of you. You for one, and Cameron, and ex-Sergeant-Major Dodds, King's Corporal, made up on the field of battle, bloody liar Dodds. I'm checking on him, and if the War Office comes up with the answers I expect, I'll have the medal ribbons he's not bloody entitled to off his chest and him inside a jail for life, or longer." RSM Hart took a deep breath and continued at the top of his voice. "But meanwhile I'll content myself with you. I'll get you in trim for the glasshouse and when you come out I've got a horrible surprise for you. Now, get this cell cleaned up for a start. Abdul!"

Abdul entered with a dirty bucket, a scrubbing brush, a floor cloth, a large piece of yellow soap and a big grin.

Two weeks passed and Jackson was still waiting and wondering about his court-martial sentence. For fourteen days he had spent

twenty-three hours out of twenty-four in his cell. He was allowed one hour a day for exercise and was guarded all the time by a sergeant and two private soldiers. The guard was changed every eight hours. To say that he was bored would be putting it mildly. He was nearly going out of his mind. He was not allowed visitors, nor was he allowed cigarettes or any form of entertainment. No books, for example. Not even a pin-up magazine, or the Bible. But RSM Hart had ensured that he never had an idle moment, apart from when he fell, almost exhausted, into his bed.

He had whitewashed the ceiling and walls of his cell, scrubbed the stone floor, and then polished it with a tooth-brush and a tin of Mansion polish. He had scrubbed his equipment and polished his brasses until the total effect was one of almost blinding brightness and he had boned and polished his boots so often that he was almost afraid to put them on in case they fell apart at the seams.

He was polishing the floor with a tooth-brush when RSM Hart entered the cell and motioned to the guard to stand easy. Jackson climbed to his feet and noticed with an inner surge of joy that RSM Hart looked ill. There was a glazed expression in his eyes and he was pale beneath his sun tan. For a moment or two he did not speak. Then, almost choking over the words, he said: "Your sentence has just come through, Jackson." Jackson began to sweat. The dreaded moment had arrived. He did not want to hear the sentence, yet at the same time he was impatient to hear the worst and get it over with. He felt his heart beating faster and his mouth was dry.

"Miscarriage of justice." Hart spoke in little more than a whisper, and Jackson had to strain his ears to hear the words. RSM Hart pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his brow.

Christ, thought Jackson, in a sudden panic. I'm in for life. Must be. It's even shaken this bastard. "How . . . how long?" he finally gulped.

"Forty-two days." The strength came back to Hart's voice, but it was husky with emotion. "Only forty-two bleedin' days."

For a few moments Jackson could not believe his good fortune.

Then a smile spread across his face. A blissful smile. Only forty-two, he inwardly gloated, and I've already served fourteen; that's fourteen from forty-two—a rapid mental calculation—twenty-eight. Only twenty-eight. Thank God. I'll manage to survive that.

The staff on the gate stared at Jackson, standing ramrod stiff in front of him, wearing full pack and marching order. The hot sun had burnt Jackson's skin a deep bronze and he was hardly aware of the heavy pack on his back. He was staring at the gate that led to freedom and thinking, I'm fit. Christ, I've never been so fit in my life. The days dragged, but I'm bloody fit now. God help any bint I get my hands on. I'd kill her with kindness. I could jump over that gate if it was the only way out. I've got muscles where nobody would expect them to grow. Bet I could take on Tommy Farr and have him worried. Charles Atlas, you too can have a body like mine.

He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the staff, then quickly looked away. These sweet, hatchet-faced bastards certainly got me fit, he thought. And any moment now I'll be out of here and on the road to freedom, heading back to dear old NAAFI. Think I'll be a good boy from now on. You don't know how comfortable life's been until you land in a dump like this. I'd better box very clever from now on and keep out of Hart's way. If he's base permanent, and I bet he's wangled that, then I'd better get a posting to the desert.

"Know where you're heading for?" enquired the gate staff pleasantly.

Jackson almost blurted out, "Freedom, staff," but checked himself just in time. Don't say a word out of place, now, he cautioned himself, or he'll have you back inside on some crazy trumped-up charge.

"No, staff," he shouted.

"Don't know where you are? Don't know where you're going, eh?" shouted the staff. "Who the bleedin' hell are you then? One of Peter Pan's lost boys?"

"No, staff. Jackson. RASC. EFI."

"NAAFI tart, eh? So you're a NAAFI tart, are you?"

"No, staff. Jackson, staff."

"Where are you going then, Jackson?"

"HQ, staff. I suppose. Cairo, staff."

"Cairo. The base, eh?"

"Yes, staff. Cairo, staff."

"The big city, eh? Gonna get boozed up in the bars again, eh? Poxed up in the knocking shops, eh?"

"No, staff. Reporting to HQ, staff, and begging for a posting up front, staff."

"Up front?" The staff spat the words out. "You, a NAAFI tart, talking about going up front?"

"Maybe not the front, staff. Forward areas. Somewhere in the forward areas, staff." I'm talking too much, thought Jackson. I'm too bloody happy. Calm it down. Don't let this disciple of Dracula's get you going. Try and get on the stupid bastard's wavelength. Don't give him the chance to hold you on dumb insolence, disobeying an order, abusive language, or any other bloody fantasy he cares to dream up. Lost in his own thoughts, Jackson did not hear what the staff said. "Pardon, staff?"

"Pardon," snarled the staff. "You deaf?"

"No, staff, but I didn't quite catch . . ."

"Then listen," bawled the staff. "Forward area. Where the hell's that?"

"The desert, staff."

"The desert? What the hell's this then?" The staff pointed his cane towards the barbed wire fence that surrounded the Detention Camp.

"Suez Canal area, staff. Base, staff."

"So it ain't the desert, then? All these millions of bleedin' acres of sweet sand ain't the desert then, ain't it? So what is it then? Lord's bleedin' cricket pitch?"

"Yes, staff. It's the desert, staff."

"What's it made of?"

"Sand, staff."

"You like it do you. You like sand?"

"Yes, staff."

"You're a bloody liar," shouted the staff. "You hate the desert. You only like the pubs and knocking shops. I've seen your bleedin' record."

"Yes, staff."

"Where you going from here then, Jackson?" enquired the staff lowering his voice a little.

"Don't know, staff."

"Don't know, eh," growled the staff. "Think I'm catching on. You're going on the trot again, ain't you? Gonna desert. Going absent, again, you AWOL bastard. You're gonna take off again, ain't you?"

"No, staff. Reporting back to my unit, staff."

The gate staff shook his head and smiled horribly. "You're going to the bloody Transit Camp. The RASC Transit Camp."

"I didn't know there was an EFI Transit Camp, staff," said Jackson with a puzzled frown.

"RASC," shouted the gate staff. "Now don't you give me any lip, know where it is?"

Jackson remembered passing it on his way to the Field Punishment and Detention Camp. "Yes, staff. It's about five miles up the road."

"You report there," said the gate staff, nodding his head. "Some of your mates are waiting for you."

"Since when, staff?" enquired Jackson feeling even more puzzled.

"Since a week ago," replied the staff as he walked around Jackson and inspected his kit critically and then, apparently satisfied with Jackson's smart turn out, or bored, he moved to the gate, opened it and bawled: "Double!"

Jackson doubled out of the Detention Camp at a record breaking pace, hardly able to believe his luck and he kept running because he had a vague fear at the back of his mind that the gate staff might order him to about turn and lock him up again. But the voice did not recall him, and eventually he slowed down and

finally halted near the black tarmac road. He slipped out of his big pack and placed it at his feet and glanced in both directions, along the road. I'd better thumb a lift, he thought, and get to the RASC Transit Camp and find out what the score is. An army truck drove towards him along the tarmac road and slowed down, then stopped. The driver looked out of the cab, stared at Jackson's immaculate kit and highly polished boots, then stared thoughtfully at the Field Punishment and Detention Camp.

"Got a fag?" enquired Jackson.

The driver, with an understanding nod of his head, handed Jackson a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. Jackson inhaled deeply, then had to hold on to the mudguard because he suddenly came over dizzy.

"You just come out?" enquired the driver.

Jackson nodded his head as he stared at the desert that swayed and shimmered before his eyes. It was a bloody awful experience, suddenly feeling sick and dizzy, yet at the same time exhilarating.

"What's it like inside there?" enquired the driver jerking his thumb towards the Detention Camp.

Jackson inhaled again and the dizziness passed, leaving him light headed and happy. He glanced towards the camp. "It's hard to put into words," he said. "Have you ever been inside a loony bin?"

"Who, me?" said the driver indignantly.

"I used to visit an old uncle of mine in a loony bin," said Jackson. "He thought he was King Edward the Seventh. Used to hold court on his off days, in the lav, seated on the bog. Used to hand out life peerages to all his pals. Well, it kept him happy." Jackson squinted towards the camp again. "That dump is just like a loony bin, and all the staff should be patients."

The driver laughed. "Hop in, mate. Bet you'll be glad to be out."

"I am," said Jackson, "and I'll put up a struggle before they get me inside there again." He unbuckled his webbing and threw his kit into the back of the truck, then climbed into the cab and made himself comfortable.

"Where to?" enquired the driver.

"RASC Transit Camp."

"That's my home, mate," said the driver, "and a right old dump it is." He started the engine and drove away.

"Can't understand it," said Jackson. "The gate staff told me I had to report to the Transit Camp. I'm not in the RASC. I'm NAAFI."

"Go on," said the driver. "So you're another one of them are you? A dozen of your mates booked in a week ago."

"What the hell are they doing in a Service Corps Transit Camp?"

"They ain't in the NAAFI any longer," replied the driver with a grin. "They've been called up into the army and if you want to know what they're doing, they're doing square bashing, the assault course, unarmed combat. Six weeks' training, mate. The same as us all had to do and by the look of them they ain't enjoying it."

Jackson could only gape at the driver. He was too shocked at this news to make a suitable reply.

12

Jackson stared at the men lying on the sandy floor of the tent, then started laughing. "I don't believe it," he choked. "Not you shower. You ain't going to let NAAFI get away with it, are you?"

"Aw, shut up," growled Edwards. After a week's marching, counter marching, rifle drill, bayonet practice, staggering over the assault course and being cursed at and abused by loud-mouthed NCOs, he was tired, hot and exhausted.

Jackson stopped laughing. "But they can't do it. It's illegal, so don't be such a lot of mugs."

"Listen to him," jeered Lynch. "Know-all Jackson."

Cameron tenderly peeled off his sock and, twisting his ankle, stared at a red pus-filled blister. "They've done it, Johnnie."

"They can't call us up in bloody Egypt," protested Jackson. "We're British. They have to send us home."

"We've done a deal of shouting," said Cameron. "Seen the British Consul, or his bloody assistant. That's as far as we could get, and he knows it's illegal, but he's no' on our side. He's on theirs."

"Are you surprised?" grinned Jackson. "Are you really

surprised? You expected them to try and baffle you with science, didn't you?"

"Thinking it over, I wasna' all that surprised," Cameron admitted.

"Ted." Jackson turned and appealed to Dodds. "You're one of the craftiest bastards I've ever set eyes on. What are your plans?"

Dodds carefully rolled over on his side, lit a cigarette and smiled at Jackson. "I'm touching the fifties, kid. So I'll be excused killing Germans and Ities, won't I?" With a slow wink, he carefully lay back, then chuckled. "Job in QM stores for me. The QM stores always been a nice little fiddle."

"Aye, you're an old man," said Cameron reasonably. "So you're entitled to a cushy number."

"Have to report sick, tomorrow." Dodds blew a perfect smoke ring and watched it disintegrate. "The spirit's willing, but the flesh is weak. I'm too old for all this bull."

"Give over," shouted Edwards. "Will you bloody well give over. You're as fit as any of us."

Dodds chuckled and carefully turned over, trying to find a more comfortable position. "My aching back tells me another story, son. Gotta face facts. I'm too old for this caper, so I'm retiring gracefully and letting you poor young bastards win this war."

"You miserable bleeder," shouted Edwards.

"He's got every right to," grinned Jackson. "Knew I could count on you, Ted. Hey, Paddy." He kicked O'Neill's recumbent body and O'Neill groaned and rolled over on his stomach. "Paddy, what are you going to pull?"

O'Neill carefully pushed himself upright into a kneeling position, then turning he leaned against the sand wall. "I called at the NAAFI, so I did, by the back door, and there were four queens residing there, dressed in little short shorts and wearing fancy sandals and bloody lipstick on their chops, an' curly haired an' all, an' I introduced meself as an ex-member of the old firm an' the queer little bastards ordered me out, so they did. What are me plans you ask me? How the hell can a fella plan or think straight when he's suffering the way I am?"

"None of us have had any luck, sportsman," said Taylor as he wearily lifted himself on one elbow. "Those frightful little queens are all madly in love with Matelots so no one else has a chance in hell." He flicked his fingers and Edwards threw him a cigarette. "Jackson, why don't you go over and have a word with them?"

Jackson laughed. "I'm not that desperate for a drink."

"It's well known he's as fit as any old buck rabbit," said O'Neill to no one in particular, "but he's not the fella to count on in an emergency."

"What are your plans, Taylor?" enquired Jackson.

"A few more weeks trying to stamp this bloody desert flat, sportsman, and I should be remarkably fit for the first time in years. I hope I'm posted to a decent infantry regiment."

"Jolly good show, Taylor, old sport," jeered Jackson. "How about you, Hawthorne?"

"Sh . . . sh . . . shut up," stuttered Hawthorne.

"It's well known that you're a nervous lad," smiled Jackson. "So you've got a pretty good out. How can a nervous lad like you fight Germans, for Chrissake? I mean, you're almost as nervous as I am."

"We're in it," said Lynch, "and there's no out, so shut up."

"So, you're all going to soldier on? Great!" Jackson leaned back and stared about him with an amused smile. "All going into the infantry, are you?"

"Except me," said Dodds.

"And me," Jackson corrected him.

"There's no way out," shouted Lynch.

"You're scared, Terry," said Jackson.

"Who's scared?"

"You are."

"I'm not bloody scared."

"You're sweating," grinned Jackson.

"I'm sick of listening to you," sulked Lynch.

"If he don't shut up, I'll shut him up," growled Edwards.

"The greatest team of survival experts I've ever set eyes on," jeered Jackson. "But as soon as the going gets hard, you quit."

Edwards slowly climbed to his feet, then halted as Jackson quickly scrambled up, holding a boot in his hand. Cameron said very quietly: "Both of you sit down, or I'll be going into action." He raised his voice. "Now, sit. I'll no' stand for any fighting."

Edwards hesitated for a few moments then pointed a finger at Jackson. "Make him shut up, then, Jock." He turned to Taylor. "Canteen's open. Coming, Mike?"

Taylor stood up, holding his mess tin. "It's gala night, tonight, sportsmen. A pint of warm beer per man. What fantastic brain dreamed up such an exquisite torture?"

"Hold on," said O'Neill as he scrambled up, momentarily forgetting his aches and pains. "There's beer in the canteen you say, tonight?"

"One pint and that's your lot," said Edwards over his shoulder as he walked out of the tent followed by Taylor.

"There's some Maltese wogs in the camp," shouted O'Neill as he searched frantically for his mess tin, "an' they're good believing teetotallers an' only happy when they're conversing with white men, as equals. So round the bastards up and let's booze their rations." He ran out of the tent, still shouting. "There's one fella with a nose three feet long like an elephant's trunk, curly black hair and a dark hide and he swears his name's McCarthy, the bloody liar."

Jackson leaned back and made himself comfortable and watched Hawthorne searching for his mess tin, then walk to the tent entrance. As he turned, Jackson saw his face working as he tried to force words through his rigid lips. "Take it easy," said Jackson, feeling sorry for him. "Try to relax."

Hawthorne gripped his fists and beat them against his legs in an effort to get the words out. "In... in... in... in... infantry. I... I... I'll bloody well fi... fi... fight." He turned and walked out of the tent, then a few moments later he shouted: "I... I'll sh... show ev... ev... everybody. I'll show..." The shouting changed to an ugly gurgling sound, then silence, then, clear and distinct, "You bastards."

Cameron turned his head and looked at Jackson. "They're all going up front if they have to. What about you, Johnnie?"

Jackson dug a small trench in the sand with the heel of his boot. "They won't get me."

"You can't beat the system."

"If they'd put me on a boat, Jock, and sent me home . . . Maybe . . . I don't know." Jackson laughed suddenly. "No. I don't suppose so. But if they think that they can just dump me over here. Three years in a bloody desert then shanghai me into the army. Oh, no. I won't let them get away with that. I'll fight."

"Fight who? You just said you wouldn't fight."

"Them. The faceless wonders. The bright lads who sit on their fat backsides behind a desk and make all the decisions. The generals. The HQ mob, the base wallahs, the politicians. Let them go up front and sample it, then they can tell me."

"Och. You're raving."

"OK. I'm leaving."

"Well, we're all in it, Johnnie. So why are you holding back?"

Jackson laughed. "That's a pretty stupid argument. Because you're in it, do I have to be in it, too?"

Cameron spat out the words. "You're yellow."

Jackson flinched, then said very quietly. "Jock, I know you've got all the guts in the world. Tough guy, punch-up expert, and all that old rubbish, but just because I'm not like you, just because I won't go in like a flaming lunatic with a rifle and bayonet . . ."

Cameron pushed his face close to Jackson's. "I thought when it came to it you'd show you had some guts. Even bloody Hawthorne . . . poor wee Hawthorne. You're yellow as a guinea."

"Shut up!" Jackson was suddenly shouting. "Shut your big ugly Scottish trap."

"Watch your words." Cameron's voice trembled with rage. "Careful with me or I'll punch you daft."

"That answers everything, doesn't it?" Jackson was still shouting. "You could beat me up with one hand tied behind your back. So what? What does that prove, you thick-nuttled Scottish git?"

Cameron stood for a long moment staring into Jackson's eyes,

then violently pushed him on one side and walked out of the tent. He walked fast, then slowed down and finally halted, and stood irresolute for a few moments, then, turning back, he shouted: "Jackson. You coming to the canteen?"

Jackson left the tent and slowly walked towards Cameron and stopped a few feet away from him and a slow smile spread across his face. "If you promise not to thump me, yeah."

"You wee soft bastard. Come on." He stuck out his foot, pushed Jackson, and sent him sprawling then kicked sand over him. When Jackson finally got to his feet they were both laughing as they walked towards the canteen.

It was hot standing at attention outside the wooden hut, but Jackson suspected that he would not be there much longer. He watched Cameron double out, and listened to Sergeant-Major Hopper shouting the same old dreary drill orders. Jock wasn't in there long, thought Jackson. They soon weighed him off. Wonder what he's in? Tanks or infantry? Old Rainbow's settled his future in about three minutes flat. Rainbow. What a name and not so old either. Captain Rainbow, not a day over thirty-five, joyously sending the boys up front. Why isn't he up there? The words of an old song floated through Jackson's mind. "... There's a rainbow round my shoulder." There's a Rainbow on my back, thought Jackson savagely, and he's been there the past six weeks, the pleasant, smiling bastard. "Do keep them busy, sergeant, they've had an easy war for a damn long time, you know." Pot calling the kettle black. He'll never see the front line, the smart Alec.

Jackson watched Cameron doubling towards him, and as Cameron passed him he said out of the corner of his mouth: "Infantry." Christ, thought Jackson, he's smiling. He looks happy. In goes Nobby Clarke now, then Edwards, then Hawthorne, poor bloody Hawthorne. Take at least an hour to sort him out. Then me. What will I say? How will I handle it? What the hell can you say? What questions does old Rainbow ask you? I bet he doesn't ask any questions. He tells you. Decided to post you to an

infantry regiment, Jackson. You're a jolly lucky chap, you know. It's a splendid life, bags of fresh air, plenty of excitement, spiffing weather, plenty of sunshine, three regular meals a day, good pay and no chance of unemployment.

Here comes old Nobby. Wonder what he's in? He was in and out in two minutes flat. Holy smoke. He can't kill us off quick enough. As Nobby doubled towards the small queue of men, he said out of the corner of his mouth: "Tanks," then switched on a lop-sided grin. But his eyes weren't smiling, thought Jackson and no bloody wonder. That's one thing they'd never get me in. A tank. Or a submarine. No, I definitely wouldn't wear a tank or a sub. What was it the baby sardine said to the mother sardine? as they swam past a submarine, "What's that, mummy?" and the mother sardine said: "That's a tin full of people, dear." What a giggle, but I wouldn't volunteer for a sardine tin. Not me. Going into action in a tank with the flaming sun belting down on it, about a hundred and fifty in the shade, stink of diesel oil. Here comes Edwards. Doesn't look too happy. Forgot to time him, but he wasn't in long. "What did he say, Hawthorne?" Jackson whispered.

"T . . . t . . . t . . . tanks," Hawthorne stuttered, then stiffened as Sergeant-Major Hopper bellowed at him.

"Good luck, Hawthorne," whispered Jackson. "Volunteer for the ATS, kiddo." Poor little sod, Jackson thought as he watched Hawthorne double away. Even if he wanted to protest, he couldn't, and I bet he does want to protest. Why put him in the infantry for God's sake? It's crazy. What use will he be? Imagine poor old Hawthorne, standing guard. By the time he's got out, "Halt, who goes there?" the bloody enemy will be through the camp and out the other side. Surely to God they'll put him in the Service Corps, or Pay Corps, or something. Not a fighting mob. They can't. Just doesn't make sense. He won't be able to tip me off as he passes, but I'll be able to tell by the look in his eyes if he's gun fodder or not.

To hell with Hawthorne, what about me? Dear old number one. The man I love most in the world. How am I going to tackle this

comic little situation? I'm sweating. Wind up, knees knocking, ticker pounding, the lot. Remember this, Jackson. They're after you. They've given Rainbow orders, destroy Jackson at all costs. Don't forget that. Don't ever forget it. Every general in the British Army is determined to knock you off, and they've passed the word on down the line, so any spare wank, lance corporal, can order you to your doom. You aren't just up against Hitler and his lot and Musso and his boys. Every hand is against you, mate.

Why are you grinning? Don't believe it? You'd better start believing it. OK. You'll soon be able to put it to the test. If they want to take care of you, old Rainbow will say as soon as you walk in: "Jackson, we've decided to give you a base job, so take your choice. Personally, I would recommend Syria." But if he says infantry, well, you'll know then won't you. And you'd better put him straight, and fast. Jackson tightened his lips. But have I got the guts to tell him? And what can I say anyway?

Here comes Hawthorne. Looks like death. He's had it. The bastards are even using him, so what chance have I got? To make a decision is one thing, but to stick to it . . . Jackson involuntarily stiffened his back as Sergeant-Major Hopper bellowed: "You stand up straight. Shoulders back. Day dreaming, lad. Shun! Want to see you move. Let's have that again. Stand at ease. Atten-shun! Forward, double. Lef . . . right, lef . . . right . . . Mark time. Knees up. Knees up. Halt!"

Jackson stared down at Captain Rainbow's bent head. He's got it all there, he thought. All my documents, my crimes, no compliments, I bet. My age, religion, height, weight, colour of hair, eyes, trade, sex. Hasn't got my finger-prints, though. Funny that. They treat us as if we're bloody criminals. The way he's breezing through my documents he must be in a hurry. Thank God Hopper's stopped stamping and shouting. How can I think with all that racket going on.

Captain Rainbow lifted his head and switched on a pleasant smile. "Ah, Jackson. Any special regiment you would care to join?"

Good teeth, thought Jackson. And a dandy little Ronald Colman moustache. You're a charmer, aren't you, when you want to be.

Jackson's throat constricted and he had to swallow hard before he could speak. "I'd like to join the Royal Army Service Corps, sir."

The charming smile was suddenly switched off as Captain Rainbow lowered his head and scanned Jackson's documents again. A good pause then he slowly raised his head and stared at Jackson with the trace of a sneering smile on his lips. "You're A1. Physically fit. Are you telling me that you're prepared to sit on your backside and let other chaps do your fighting for you?"

"Yes, sir." The words were out before Jackson could check them. Loud and clear, no hesitation. A flat statement. The truth. And I feel calm, thought Jackson. I bet he doesn't want the truth, but he can have it. I've shaken him rigid. He doesn't know what's hit him. Look at him. Eyes nearly popping out of his head. Lost for words. Coming to now, though. Stick for a base job where the only thing that drops from the sky is the early morning dew.

"You don't mean that, of course, do you?" Captain Rainbow's voice cut across Jackson's thoughts.

"I do, sir. I mean every word of it." Jackson listened to the sound of his own voice. It sounded perfectly calm and reasonable. "I'll settle for a base job, sir."

"You will settle?" Captain Rainbow stared past Jackson to Sergeant-Major Hopper with a look of blank amazement on his face. Surely this chap's joking, he was thinking. Can't be serious. I mean, no man in his right mind . . . But I'm damned if I'm going to humour him. "I'm posting you to an infantry regiment, Jackson."

"No, sir." Jackson shook his head and relaxed a little.

"Stand up straight! Shoulders back!" Sergeant-Major Hopper bellowed into Jackson's left ear.

Jackson turned his head and stared at Sergeant-Major Hopper.

"Don't look at me. Eyes front and straighten up. Straighten up!"

Jackson straightened his shoulders and stared at the wall behind Captain Rainbow. "I expect you know, sir, that NAAFI dumped us in this camp instead of shipping us back home. I'm not a resident of Egypt, so I don't legally come under the National Service

Act. Residents of this country—anyone holding a British passport, anyway—may be called to the colours, but I'm not . . .”

Captain Rainbow interrupted him. “I'm not concerned with your problems, Jackson. I don't give a damn. All this has been thrashed out with the British Consul.”

“No, it hasn't been.”

“I won't argue with you. My instructions were to put you and the other men through six weeks' basic training and then post you wherever I saw fit. So I'm posting you to an infantry regiment. Double him out, sergeant-major.”

“About turn. Double march,” Sergeant-Major Hopper bellowed. Jackson stood his ground. “No, sir.”

“Gave you an order,” grated Sergeant-Major Hopper. “Give you one more chance, and this time, move. About turn!”

“You're not having me in the infantry,” Jackson shouted.

Sergeant-Major Hopper grabbed Jackson by the scruff of the neck, fully prepared to heave him out of the office, but Captain Rainbow motioned to him to leave Jackson alone. Reluctantly, Sergeant-Major Hopper moved away and halted near the door.

“Jackson. You are going to enlist in an infantry regiment,” said Captain Rainbow.

“No, sir.”

“And you will see action. You will fight.”

“No, sir.” Jackson shook his head.

“That is an order. I am giving you an order, Jackson, and if you refuse you are guilty of disobeying an order and that is a serious offence. You act stupidly, but I don't think that you are as stupid as you pretend to be. You fully understand everything that I have said, don't you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Splendid. Now I will tell you what happens to chaps who refuse to obey orders. They are sentenced and sent to Field Punishment and Detention Centres, better known as the glasshouse.” Captain Rainbow switched on his charming smile. “There they are taught to obey orders. Any damn orders that the staff throw at them, and when they come out, Jackson, they are jolly well house-

trained and are, if anything, over anxious to do exactly what they are told." Again the charming smile. "Are you still with me?"

"Yes, sir." Jackson switched on his attentive, willing to please look.

"Good. Now, I've been pretty tolerant under the circumstances, considering your bloody minded attitude, and I could quite easily have you marched out and have you marched back in here under escort and charge you with insolence and refusal to obey an order, and award you twenty-eight days field punishment. Still with me, Jackson?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jackson, switching on his anxious look. "I'm still with you. You can sentence me to twenty-eight days right now if you feel like it."

Captain Rainbow smiled and shook his head as he casually turned the pages of Jackson's documents. "No. Not if I feel like it. If you deserve it. There's a world of difference." He stared at Jackson's documents, then frowned. "It slipped my mind. You've already been in the glasshouse, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Forty-two days. You don't want to go back, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Then stop acting like a bloody fool."

"I'm not foot slogging it, sir, for you or anybody else. I'm not fighting."

Captain Rainbow pushed back his chair and shouted: "Then you damn well will go back to prison. Do you hear me? Back to the glasshouse."

"OK." Jackson shouted back. "Shove me back inside. I'll spend the rest of the war there."

"Are you mad?" Captain Rainbow's voice trembled with rage. "Didn't they teach you anything inside there? Didn't they teach you the meaning of discipline?"

"The screws?" Jackson looked as if he wanted to burst out laughing. "What's the message they've got to pass on? The poor bastards are so thick. Listen, they're all shout. All they can do is shout. The first week's hell. Frightening. But once you're fit and

you can take it you start laughing inside you. At them. You say, yes, staff, and all the time you're laughing at them. Same as him." Jackson turned and pointed at Sergeant-Major Hopper.

"March him out, sergeant-major," said Captain Rainbow as he slowly sat down behind his desk.

"About turn. Double march," shouted Sergeant-Major Hopper as he jerked open the door. "Lef . . . lef . . . lef . . . Knees up. Up!"

"Stay here. I want a word with you." Captain Rainbow leaned his elbows on the desk and began carefully reading Jackson's documents.

"Halt. Stand still. Still," shouted Sergeant-Major Hopper as he stood in the open doorway, glaring at Jackson's back. "About turn. Still. Still, I said. Stand still."

Jackson screwed up his eyes against the sun.

"Stand him at ease, sergeant-major," said Captain Rainbow, not bothering to look up from Jackson's documents. "And close the door."

"Stand at ease. Easy." Sergeant-Major Hopper slammed the door shut, marched six paces then slammed to attention as he faced Captain Rainbow across the desk.

"Stand at ease, sergeant-major."

Sergeant-Major Hopper moved his feet and relaxed.

Captain Rainbow turned pages and read Jackson's documents from beginning to end and then leaned back in his chair and stared at Sergeant-Major Hopper. "What do you think?"

"Trouble maker, sir."

"That's obvious. What else?"

"I know the cure, sir. Post him. Infantry mob, or tanks, but post him."

"He won't go."

"Won't go." Sergeant-Major Hopper screwed up his face. "Then give him another spell in the glasshouse, and the next time he goes inside, sir, it might pay to have a word with the RSM. If he knows he's got the original laughing boy . . ." Sergeant-Major Hopper smiled and braced his arms behind his back. "Pity I didn't

know about him, sir. I'd of had him laughing. The other side of his face."

Captain Rainbow looked thoughtful. "He refuses to fight, and is prepared to spend the rest of the war in a Field Punishment Camp."

"All talk, sir. Another twenty-eight days inside and..."

Captain Rainbow interrupted Sergeant-Major Hopper. "But, say it isn't? I think I should get a second opinion. Major Bancroft."

"The trick cyclist, sir?" Sergeant-Major Hopper looked disgusted. "If you don't mind my saying so..."

Captain Rainbow laughed. "I know your views, and some of them I share, but I still think that he should take a look at Jackson's head."

"Sir, Major Bancroft can smell out a loony boy, but then who can't? I've sent him a few as you know. The young fella who tried to hang himself, for example. Right round the bend, that one, sir, couldn't stop crying. Even on parade. But Jackson's not crazy. He's just a line dodger. A smart Alec. What's the major gonna do with him? Take him to picces and put him back together, all nice and tidy?"

Captain Rainbow laughed. "He claims that he can, sergeant-major. So let's see how he fares with Jackson. Just let's see."

A fly tickled Major Bancroft's ear, so he shook his head violently and the fly buzzed away. Captain Rainbow thought that the major was disagreeing with him. He would, of course, he thought. These bloody trick cyclists know it all. Well tuned in on everyone's thought waves. I bet he thinks I'm an open book. "Jackson's a line dodger," Captain Rainbow repeated firmly. "But you make up your own mind about him."

"I will," readily agreed Major Bancroft. "Send him in as soon as you like." The tent walls were rolled back and Major Bancroft could see Jackson, watching a group of men, who all looked numb with boredom and were taking it in turns to undergo a test. Four wooden stakes had been beaten into the sand and the men were

taking it in turns to collect horseshoes and run from one stake to the next, deposit the horseshoe over the wooden stake, then run to the next one. A sergeant with a stop-watch timed them.

Captain Rainbow turned his head and a slow smile spread across his face. "What does that prove?"

"It tells us something about the man's character," replied Major Bancroft.

"If it's top secret," smiled Captain Rainbow.

"Take rather a long time to explain," said Major Bancroft.

"I bet." Captain Rainbow slowly stood up. "You'll let me have your report?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." Captain Rainbow walked out of the tent and shouted: "Jackson, Major Bancroft wants to see you. Double over."

Jackson trotted towards Captain Rainbow, then halted and stood stiffly to attention. "Sir."

Captain Rainbow looked Jackson over, noting the dazzling white belt and gaiters, the gleaming brass work, the highly polished boots. "Smart turn out, Jackson. You look like a soldier."

"If I didn't, sir, I'd be faulted on parade," smiled Jackson.

"You really must make up your mind, Jackson," said Captain Rainbow with an easy going smile on his lips and a hard look in his eyes. "Either you are a soldier, who's prepared to fight, or you're a bloody conchie. Give it some thought, will you?"

"I will, sir," replied Jackson promptly.

"Double away then. Mustn't keep Major Bancroft waiting, must we?"

"No, sir." Jackson threw up a salute and doubled into the tent and halted facing Major Bancroft, who was seated behind a small wooden table.

Major Bancroft stared at Jackson for a long moment then nodded to a chair and said curtly, "Sit down. Help yourself to a cigarette." He pushed a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches towards Jackson, then picked up a letter and read it quickly.

"Thank you, sir." Jackson helped himself to a cigarette, lit it, sat down, and made himself comfortable.

"Captain Rainbow thinks you're a line dodger." Major Bancroft dropped the letter carelessly on the desk. "Like to comment on that?"

"No. I don't think so, sir."

"Not worried, eh?" smiled Major Bancroft.

"He's entitled to his opinion."

"Nervous, Jackson?"

"No," Jackson replied promptly.

"Then why have you got your legs tied up in a knot?" smiled Major Bancroft.

Jackson carefully moved his legs. "I suppose I am a bit nervous."

"No need to be. I'm here to help you if I can." Major Bancroft leaned back in his chair. "Captain Rainbow thinks that you're a lead swinger. A line dodger, and a fake."

"Good luck to him," smiled Jackson.

"Not bothered about other people's opinions, eh?"

"No. I'm not," said Jackson. "To hell with other people's opinion. Who cares? When it comes to it you're always on your own, so you have to look after number one. It's the law of survival."

Major Bancroft smiled. "You must be a rare bird. Very few people can honestly say that they don't care about other people's opinion."

"I'm saying it," replied Jackson, "and I mean it. I don't give a damn what people think of me. I don't sit in judgement, so why should others?"

"Don't you?" smiled Major Bancroft. "What do you think of Captain Rainbow?"

"I think he's a nit. But who cares what I think? I don't suppose he's bothered. If he is then he ought to be sitting here having his head examined."

"You've sat in judgement on Captain Rainbow," smiled Major Bancroft.

"OK. I've formed my own private opinion of him. He's in a safe base job, and he'll cling on to it." Jackson laughed as he dogged out his cigarette and helped himself to another. "And he

writes a report about me. I'm a line dodger. What the hell is he, then?"

"Not a bad argument." Major Bancroft slowly nodded his head. "But have you bothered to find out why he's in a base job?"

"Because it's safe," replied Jackson promptly.

"Or because he's damn good at his job?"

"He's great," said Jackson. "This morning he ordered ten of my mates up front. He's sent hundreds up there. Thousands."

"Did you mention this to him?" enquired Major Bancroft.

"Well, sir," Jackson looked thoughtful, "something told me that he wouldn't like to hear the truth."

"Very wise of you, Jackson," replied Major Bancroft dryly. "Now let's see if you like it. Why do you refuse to fight?"

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" said Jackson. "I'm a coward."

Major Bancroft pulled a pad and pencil towards him and scrawled a word on it. "Coward," he said. "Do as a heading. Let's start with that. Any special kind of coward?"

"A live one," said Jackson after a good pause.

"Fine." Major Bancroft nodded his head. "A live coward. Very good. Better a live coward than a dead hero, eh? Now when did you first learn that you were a coward?"

"About ten seconds after I was born," said Jackson. "A big fat woman who smelt of disinfectant and wore rimless glasses smacked me, the old bitch, and I started howling. That's no way for a new member of the human race to carry on, is it? I should have been cheering after being locked up in that dark cupboard for months, shouldn't I?"

"You remember that incident well, eh?" smiled Major Bancroft. Jackson nodded his head. "I've never got over it."

"Now, we'll be serious shall we?" Major Bancroft doodled on the pad. "As a small boy, were you good at sports?"

"Swimming. Not bad at cricket. Liked boxing until I was about fourteen."

"Then what happened?" Major Bancroft interrupted Jackson.

"I got hurt," said Jackson, wrinkling his brow as he tried to think back. "Until then I always seemed to win. I was working as

a messenger boy. My first job. And Mitchell was the office boy, bigger than me. We were in the tea room. Very small room. Something I said . . . joking . . . I didn't want to fight. Suddenly scared. Funny. I hadn't been before. It didn't matter about him being bigger . . . No room to duck or dodge. I took a hell of a pasting." Jackson suddenly laughed. "Who cares?"

Major Bancroft scrawled on the paper. "Discovered that you were a coward. Age fourteen. When beaten up . . ."

Jackson interrupted him. "No. Not because of that."

"No?" Major Bancroft stared at Jackson.

"I don't know. Who cares?" Jackson sat back in his chair. Supposed to lay you out on a couch, aren't they? he thought. So we're going back to the old childhood stuff, are we? I could fill in the dots and dashes for him easily. But it's his job to work me out, so let him. When I was about fourteen I found out that I got on pretty well with people. I could make them laugh. That's when I stopped ~~tramping~~ kids. It was more fun making them laugh. Could that be it? Jackson suddenly laughed. This idiot will be getting me at it, if I don't watch out.

"Something funny, Jackson?" enquired Major Bancroft.

"No." Jackson shook his head. "It's pathetic."

"What is?"

"Me. You. The human race."

"Perhaps." Major Bancroft smiled. "You've spent the best part of the war with NAAFI. So you haven't seen any action, have you?"

"I've seen the results. Burnt-out tanks. The graves."

"You've been up the front then?"

"Yes." Jackson nodded his head.

"Then let's suppose," Major Bancroft looked steadily at Jackson, "suppose you were in the infantry and going into action . . ."

Jackson smiled and shook his head. "It's no good. I'm not falling for it."

"I said, 'let's suppose'. I'm simply asking you to use your imagination. Now, supposing you were going into action with a rifle and a bayonet. What would you do?"

Jackson looked serious. "Find the first bloody great hole I could, dive in and stay there."

Major Bancroft made a note on his pad. Very calm and self-assured. No visible sign of nerves.

"Got that down?" smiled Jackson. "Right, then add this to it. If I couldn't find a hole, I'd bloody soon make one."

"Thanks," smiled Major Bancroft and wrote on the pad: Seems to be well adjusted. Cheerfully confesses to being a coward. Not ashamed. No obvious signs of neurosis. Appears to be answering my questions truthfully. Interesting. He turned the page and smiled at Jackson. "If you were given the choice, which would you prefer? The infantry or the tanks?" He scribbled the word "infantry" on the pad.

"Infantry," said Jackson after a moment's hesitation.

"The small room," smiled Major Bancroft.

"What?" Jackson looked puzzled. "Oh, that. Might be, but I don't think so. I wouldn't be in charge if I were in a tank. I'd have to go along with it."

Individualist. Insists on thinking for himself. Major Bancroft scribbled on the pad. Natural rebel. Refuses to conform. He looked keenly at Jackson. "I suppose you know that most men are cowards at heart?"

Jackson nodded his head in agreement. "I suppose so."

"But they beat it. They learn to obey orders. They find in time of war, for example, that they have a moral obligation to their country."

Jackson tapped his head with his knuckles. "Solid wood," he said cheerfully.

"You aren't beholden to anyone? Your parents, or a girl?"

"I love me," said Jackson.

"Your parents didn't love you?"

"Oh, balls," said Jackson suddenly irritated. "Look, I know you've got to do your job and maybe it makes sense to you, and I'll play games if you want me to, but don't give me this did mummy and daddy love me stuff."

"Did I hit a nerve, Jackson?"

"When I was a little kid they were great. Then they started getting on each other's nerves, so as soon as I could think for myself and move around I got out. They weren't all that good, or bad. Just bloody average. Mum's a chapel goer and dad boozes. Oil and water. Now they live their separate lives. When they meet they make noises. Polite noises. They've got past rowing. Dad says, 'How was chapel, love?' and mum says, 'Very nice. Did you have a nice time,' and dad says, 'Fred's got his chest again. Very bad cough, should stay in bed with it,' and mum bites her tongue on 'Should stay out of the pubs and so should you, you drunken old swine.' Instead she says, 'Sorry to hear about Fred. Min's not well. It's her back again.' "

Jackson stopped talking suddenly and yawned. Even thinking about his parents bored him. He still had some respect for his mother. She had had a hard life and worked hard. Dead keen to bring me up decently, Jackson thought. She really tried, but poor old dad, soon as there was even the hint of a row in the air, off like a whippet to the pub and a few pints and a good old moan to his mates. Pathetic, and now here's this trick cyclist trying to stir it all up. Hoping to learn something. There's nothing to find out. Days and weeks and months and years, all the same. All blanks.

Jackson stared at Major Bancroft. "There's nothing there for you. Streets of little back to back houses and number 51, where I was born, is as clean as a new pin, inside, but the front room always smells a bit musty. It's only used Sundays. Well, you mustn't wear the furniture out, must you? It has to last a lifetime. Can't we talk about something else? Look, all you've got to decide is, am I a hundred per cent coward, or am I trying to swing the lead."

"Exactly." Major Bancroft nodded his head in agreement. "Take time of course."

"How long?"

"A fortnight, perhaps. You'll have to undergo a number of tests."

"Do they work?" Jackson was genuinely interested.

"I like to think so," smiled Major Bancroft.

"But say someone fakes the tests, sir?"

"We can tell. So I don't advise you to try it, Jackson."

"How can you tell?"

"It's rather too complicated to go into, but I can promise that I'll know something about you by the time the tests are finished." Major Bancroft stood up. "That's all for now. Report here at 0900 hours tomorrow."

"So long, Hawthorne," said Jackson, holding out his hand. "Look out for yourself."

Hawthorne turned his back on Jackson and struggled into his big pack. "Ge . . . ge . . . get lost," he stuttered.

Sergeant-Major Hopper looked into the tent and shouted, "Come on you lot. Transport's waiting. Let's see you move."

Lynch brushed past Jackson.

"Let's know how you get on, Terry," said Jackson.

"Get stuffed," snarled Lynch as he stepped past Sergeant-Major Hopper and walked towards the waiting three-ton truck.

Edwards deliberately bumped into Jackson as he passed him and sent him sprawling.

"Watch it," shouted Jackson, for once losing his temper. Sand had got into his mouth and he choked and spat out the sand.

Edwards turned and kicked sand over Jackson. "Only one thing I regret," he shouted as he ran out of the tent. "I didn't do you over."

There was sand in Jackson's eyes now and he was half blinded as he staggered around the tent bumping into people. "The bastard. Where is he?"

"Shut your trap," shouted Sergeant-Major Hopper as he pushed Jackson and sent him sprawling again. "Let's have the rest of you now, outside, at the double."

Jackson struggled up again and wiped his tear-filled eyes on a dirty handkerchief. Dim figures pushed past him and suddenly he was alone. He sat down abruptly, still dabbing at his eyes with his

handkerchief. Tears rolled down his cheeks, carrying the few grains of sand that had got under his eyelids, with them. His eyes still hurt, but he could see clearly again. He stood up and walked out of the tent and watched the men throwing their kit into the back of the lorry. Then one by one they climbed in. Jackson walked towards the lorry and halted a few paces away from it. Cameron was the last to climb aboard. "Jock," called out Jackson. Cameron, poised to jump into the back of the lorry turned his head and looked at Jackson. "Keep your nose clean, Jock," said Jackson, then, moving towards him he held out his hand. Cameron looked Jackson up and down from his highly polished boots to the crown of his head. "Piss off, you useless bloody article," he said as he jumped into the truck.

Jackson listened to the lorry revving up then watched it as it slowly drove away and bumped across the desert. Not since he was a small boy had he ever felt so alone and unwanted. It was a new experience and he half enjoyed it. It was a sad experience. Hurtful. It made him angry and sick in his guts. Face it, he thought, savagely as he dug his hands in his pockets. You've got a great choice facing you. Be well liked, one of the boys, and stay with them. Share your last fag with them. Share their discomforts, and go up the line with them and probably end up sharing a grave with them, or be on your own. Great . . . They're mad with me because they quit and I didn't. Ox heads, that's all they are. Thick. Stupid. Do anything they're told.

Even Jock. I'm surprised about him. No, I'm not. He was always half ashamed because he was in NAAFI. Poor old Jock's got a touch of the heroes. He's got to prove to himself that he can do it. Hawthorne. God help him. He won't last ten minutes up there, and poor old Paddy O'Neill. Drunk, he's a mess, but sober he's a shaking wreck and Edwards is all shout. Bully boy Edwards. No guts when it comes to it. And old school tie Taylor. He and Jock are about the only two that have a chance in hell. Taylor could wind up with a commission, now he's off the booze. The rest, bloody liabilities. If anyone can start a full scale retreat that shower can. Jackson laughed silently to himself. He had talked himself

back into a good humour. He turned his head as Sergeant-Major Hopper said quietly: "Hands out of your pockets. That's better. Not in civvy street yet, Jackson."

"No, sir," Jackson automatically stiffened to attention. Funny how even a few weeks in the army gets you doing things automatically, he thought. Any cross-eyed nit with a stripe on his arm has a six to four chance of putting the fear of God up you. Like a disease, it's catching. All the time we have to keep a wary eye out for the symptoms. They can make you sweat because they've got almost unlimited power. You've got to be so damned smart and alert. Watchful. Always on guard. You even begin to think in army terms. Watch Hopper. Don't give him a chance. Trying to scare the pants off me with a dirty look.

He's sweating, thought Hopper gleefully. The clever box of tricks is sweating. Wish I'd known about this bright lad before today. I'd of given him a happy bloody six weeks, blisters on his feet and stripes on his back where the bleedin' straps bite in. I'd have him assaulting the bleedin' assault course. Dodgy boys I can't stomach, and cowards make me want to vomit me guts up. This bright article, this so called bleedin' Englishman, mustn't get away with it. I'll have a little chat with him just to cheer him up. "Jackson, think you'll get your ticket to civvy street?"

"No, sir," said Jackson with a cagey look in his eyes.

"Like it, wouldn't you, Jackson?"

"I'm not bothered one way or the other."

"Not bothered?"

"No, because I won't get my ticket, sir."

"Trying, though, ain't you, eh? You're trying?"

"No, sir."

"What you doing then, eh? What game you playing then?"

"Playing soldiers, sir."

"Dead right, you are." Hopper suddenly shouted, "Playing at it, not doing it, not fighting. Why is this then? Is it nerves? Are they playing you up? Tell me your troubles, boy." Sergeant-Major Hopper couldn't stop shouting. After two years in the desert, one year in the front line, and one at base in the Suez area, he was

going out of his mind, but wasn't aware of it. Most nights he woke up shouting but had forgotten why by the next morning. All the drill instructors under him knew that he was going out of his mind, but they didn't know that they were going out of their minds. It was a vicious circle. Routine, boredom, monotony, bad food, drilling recruits, who mostly didn't want to be drilled, out in the full heat of the sun too often, and for too long. All of the staff in the camp were half mad. The drill instructors, the PT instructors, the cooks, Sergeant-Major Hopper, Captain Rainbow, and probably Major Bancroft was crazier than any of them, although he seemed to be the sanest man in the camp.

"Yes, sir," said Jackson. "It's my nerves."

"Ah, so that's your little problem, eh, Jackson?" Hopper was still shouting.

"That's my problem," agreed Jackson, who didn't mind saying exactly what he thought to Major Bancroft, because he appeared to be reasonably intelligent, but he was going to play it pretty crafty with a man who couldn't stop shouting and who had a mad look in his eyes.

"A nervous wreck, are you?" shouted Hopper.

"Yes, sir."

"Your mates all looked like nervous wrecks to me," shouted Sergeant-Major Hopper, "but they're going up front." He stopped shouting as suddenly as he had started and said in a calm, reasonable tone of voice: "And you'll see the front line, Jackson, you'll see action. You'll fight, because I'm gonna persevere. I'm gonna personally see to it that you don't pull the wool over Major Bancroft's eyes, and by the time I've had a talk to the examining board they'll see you in a new light." He turned on his heels and marched away. Stepping out very smartly across the desert sands.

Watching him, Jackson thought, he's crazy. Well round the bend. Anyone can see that.

Jackson came to a decision as he stared at the pile of horseshoes and the four wooden stakes stuck into the sand. I'm going to beat

the world record. I'm going to show stop-watch Charlie that one of his loony boys can really move, he thought, as he weighed the first horseshoe in his hand. Now, let's see. I run and place this horseshoe on the stake at the end, run back and collect another horseshoe and place it on the left-hand stake, run back and place it on the stake nearest me, run back and place the next horseshoe on the right-hand stake and do it four times. Better count the horseshoes. That's right, sixteen. Wonder what it's in aid of. Wonder what it proves. The fact that I'm prepared to do it must, I suppose, prove I'm a nut. Some of these prize Herberts have deliberately balled it up, but I'll play it fair and square. I'm going to prove to everybody that I'm one hundred per cent sane. One of the few. That I'm so sane that I won't go into action with a rifle and bayonet and commit suicide. Jackson glanced towards the sergeant who held the stop-watch. "Ready," he said. The sergeant nodded his head. "Go."

Jackson went into action and when he had deposited the last horseshoe on the right-hand stake he ran, panting, to the sergeant and gasped: "How was that? What was my time?"

"I can't tell you that," said the sergeant.

"I was fast, though, wasn't I?" boasted Jackson.

"Greased lightning," the sergeant agreed.

"Did I beat the record?" Jackson enquired eagerly.

"By a mile," said the sergeant. "You can certainly move."

"I intended to," said Jackson with a complacent smile. "I don't like being beaten."

Major Bancroft carefully read the list of names and the times the men had taken to place the horseshoes on the wooden stakes. "Jackson's proving himself to be an eager beaver isn't he," he said to the sergeant.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant agreed.

"His time's fantastic. Are you sure it's right?"

"It's right, sir. I timed him."

"Useful man to have in the next Olympics," chuckled Major Bancroft.

"He doesn't like being beaten," said the sergeant.

Major Bancroft nodded his head. "That adds up. I suppose something went wrong?"

"He didn't do it in the correct sequence, and he finished up with five horseshoes on the right-hand side stake and only three on the left. I think he tries to be too damn clever."

"No, sergeant," smiled Major Bancroft. "He wants to excel at everything, and in his way he's quite bright. But he finds it impossible to conform. Even on a simple task like this, where he's told exactly what he has to do he subconsciously rebels, so he bitches it up. Five on the right-hand stake, and three on the left. He couldn't make his intentions more obvious if he shouted at the top of his lungs. 'To hell with you. I'll do things my way.'"

"You mean he does it deliberately, sir?" enquired the sergeant.

"What do you think?"

"Well, he could fool me. I thought he was doing his best."

"And so he was." Major Bancroft leaned back in his chair. "He was going to show all of us just how damn smart he was, and the smarter he tries to be the more he exposes himself. He's a neurotic. He'll never fit into society and if I was going into action I'd hate to have him anywhere near me."

"These puzzles," said Jackson as he glanced up at Major Bancroft, who was glancing over his shoulder. "Fascinating."

"You think so, Jackson? Think you'll be able to solve them?"

"I'm not sticking my chin out," said Jackson. "I said they were fascinating. I didn't say they were easy."

"Some are, you know."

"They look easy." Jackson wrinkled his brow. "But I'm looking for the catch. If they're as easy as they look, then any damn fool can do them."

"Time's passing," said Major Bancroft. "Do the best you can."

Jackson printed 16 on a sheet of paper, then glanced at the

puzzles, hesitated for a moment, and then printed A next to the figure 16, and turned a page. Too easy, he thought, as he printed 17B, then 18A. It's too easy. Too straightforward. He began to feel vaguely worried. It can't be as simple as it looks. He sucked his pencil as he stared at page 19. It was hot in the classroom and he suddenly felt irritated. Wonder how the other loony boys are getting on. He glanced about him at the bent heads at the other desks. In the five days that he had been at the school he had got to know most of them. They don't look all that bothered, he thought, and felt vaguely puzzled. Well, I'd better plough on. Get on with it. The first thought that enters your head. He turned a page, hesitated, and changed his mind.

Major Bancroft pushed the cigarettes and matches over the table. "Help yourself. You didn't try and fake the tests."

"Victory V's," said Jackson looking with disdain at the cigarettes. "Made in Mother India out of old rope, tea leaves, and crushed beetles. Sorry, but I can't smoke them."

"Neither can I," said Major Bancroft candidly. "That's why I give them away."

"How do you know I didn't fake the tests?"

"We always know," smiled Major Bancroft. "A lot of chaps deliberately give the wrong answers, but we always know of course."

"I wouldn't waste my time, or yours," said Jackson. "I suppose you can't tell me how I came out in the tests?"

"Afraid not. Have you a girl friend back home, Jackson?"

"Had one, sir, but she got tired of waiting."

"How did you feel about her? Did you love her?"

Jackson stared at Major Bancroft. "Every chance I got," he said with a deliberate leer. "We're on the sex bit now, are we, he thought. Knew that would come up sometime."

"Sex was all you thought about? Is that what you're telling me, Jackson?"

"Morning, noon and night," said Jackson with an even more horrible leer. "By the fireside in the gloaming, over the kitchen

sink, walking in the park, in graveyards. We were both crazy about graveyards, but gave them a miss in the summer. The mosquitoes. I'm not going to discuss my girl with you, sir."

"You don't have to. Have you ever loved anyone else?"

"Only the Germans and the Ities," said Jackson with a grin. "I love them so much. I don't want to hurt them."

"Glad you're giving me all the right answers," said Major Bancroft.

"Doing my best, sir." Jackson returned Major Bancroft's pleasant smile. He's not so daft, this one, he thought. Sometimes he gets on my wavelength, but I could fool him if I wanted to. Sure I could. But what's the point of it? I know what I'm doing. The only thing I don't know is where I'm going. Where am I going? Not the infantry . . . Hot. Damn hot inside here. How I hate this bloody desert. Flies and the hot winds. Not going into the tanks either. Three to one the glasshouse. Christ. Will I be able to take it?

"Jackson." Major Bancroft leaned across the table. "I don't think I've met a man yet who hasn't some pride, some sense of patriotism."

"Hope you aren't going to get emotional," smiled Jackson.

Major Bancroft smiled. "I doubt it."

"The Germans are great on the old patriotism lark, aren't they?" Jackson stopped smiling. "All those Gestapo boys. The SS. Dragging Jews out of their beds. Marching them off . . . Somewhere . . . To rest homes? Now I'm putting up the wrong argument, aren't I? The Germans have got to be stopped. Hitler's crazy. He's got to be stopped. Given time he'll destroy every Jew in Europe. That's supposed to be the plan, isn't it? The Germans have practically taken over Europe. Destroying everything in sight. So, I've got to come out fighting. I've got to stop them. That makes sense, I suppose?"

"What do you think?" Major Bancroft leaned back in his chair and stared at Jackson.

"The world's sick. Every man who picks up a gun is sick. As one of the few sane men left in this world I refuse to join the

lunatics. The wrong argument again. I should be a good patriot and go out and murder those murdering Nazi bastards. You can't convince me that that's right. I'm a coward surrounded by millions of crazy bastards. All good patriots screaming for blood. I'm having nothing to do with it. That's why I joined NAAFI. I was looking for a safe billet. A funk-hole, but they threw me out. Pity. Well, I'm looking for another safe billet. The Service Corps, maybe. I'll take petrol up front, bullets and ammo, and let the crazy bastards get on with it, or I'll go back to the glasshouse and use my brains and obey all the crazy orders, and bide my time because one day this crazy war will be over." I'm talking too much, Jackson thought, but I'm speaking the truth. I suppose it's the truth, as near as I can get to it anyway.

"Aren't you getting rather hysterical?" said Major Bancroft with a deliberate yawn.

"I hope not," said Jackson. "There's enough neurotic patriots running around as it is. Wish I could take a peep into your files. J. Jackson BXE 242607. Head case. Coward. Hates violence, but enjoys a good beer up and only likes girls for screwing. Profession. Thief. Anti-social. Unpatriotic. Doesn't like flag waving sessions. Refuses to die for his king and country. Prefers to go into the nick. Won't kill Germans, prefers digging holes."

"Profession, thief, did you say?" smiled Major Bancroft.

"That just slipped out. If these are the only fags we've got . . ." Jackson helped himself to a V1, lit it, and went into a coughing fit. "These fags aren't made of old rope after all," he choked. "Human bloody ashes."

"I think you were trying to tell me that it's morally wrong to fight. It's also morally wrong to steal, isn't it?"

Jackson nodded his head, in complete agreement with Major Bancroft. "Yes, sir. And sleeping with girls is morally wrong. So is swearing and getting boozed up and abusive language and not being a good Christian. You know. All the things I like doing are morally wrong, and all the things I hate doing are morally right. So what does that make me? A cowardly, selfish bastard, with no moral scruples?"

Major Bancroft smiled. "Not a bad summary of your character. Why are you so ashamed?"

"Give over," laughed Jackson as he stood up. "Let's pack it in, shall we?"

"The other NAAFI men who were posted to this camp, I suppose they were rather like you. Selfish, cowardly bastards. Where are they now?" Major Bancroft was still smiling.

"In the front line. Some in the Tank Corps. The rest in the infantry. The mugs." Suddenly Jackson was shouting. "The bloody mugs."

"That's right," Major Bancroft nodded his head, "the bloody mugs. And now you're on your own, aren't you?"

"OK." Jackson laughed. "I'm on my own. Finished with me now?"

"Yes, you can go, Jackson."

"Recommending me for the tanks, sir?" Major Bancroft stared at Jackson "Or the infantry?" A smile spread over Jackson's face. "Or medicine and duty."

"The board will decide. They may take my report on your mental state into consideration, or they may not. Now, get out."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Jackson threw up a smart salute.

"Better a live coward than a dead hero, eh?" Major Bancroft was still smiling.

"Yes, sir. Seems to make sense to me."

"But how does a man live with it?"

Jackson leaned his hands on the table and stared into Major Bancroft's eyes. "He wakes up in the middle of the night puts his arm out and touches something warm. Flesh. His m. sus. He watches his kids grow up, and when he passes the Cenotaph he doffs his hat." Jackson straightened up, turned on his heels and walked out of the tent.

Another stinking hot day, thought Jackson as he paced restlessly outside the wooden hut. The sun burned down from a clear blue sky and a hot wind stirred the sand. Waiting, always bloody well

waiting for something, Jackson thought as he stared at the other soldiers who were also patiently waiting to be vetted by the board. Some of them were behaving rather oddly. Jackson stared at a soldier who had suddenly gone down on all fours and was howling like a dog. Jackson lit a cigarette, still watching the soldier, who suddenly and abruptly stopped howling and stood up and carried on his conversation with a soldier with buck teeth. As Jackson walked past the soldier who was now talking quite rationally about the film he had seen the previous evening in the camp cinema, Jackson said quite pleasantly: "I'll back you if they put you in trap one, mate." Then he stopped abruptly as he was confronted with a soldier who was holding out his arms in front of him. Jackson noted that the soldier's hands were shaking violently. Switching on a sympathetic expression, Jackson said: "You've got a bad attack of the shakes, old son, haven't you?"

The soldier nodded his head eagerly in agreement. "Can't control them, see. Can't stop them shaking."

"I can see that," said Jackson. "The worse dose of shakes I've ever seen. You can't hold a rifle with them, you know."

"That's a fact," agreed the soldier who was shaking even more violently now. "I couldn't hold a bleedin' rifle. Not with these."

"You must feel terrible." Jackson was all sympathy now. "What a state to be in. You can't fight the Germans shaking like that, can you?"

"I feel terrible," the soldier agreed. "That's why I joined up, wasn't it? To fight them bleedin' Nazis."

"'Course it is," agreed Jackson. "That's why we all joined up. To fight them horrible square heads. I wasn't waiting back home for them to come over and rape my mum." He glanced at the soldier's cap badge. "You're in the RASC, are you?"

"Been up front," said the soldier promptly. "Mersa Matruh. Hellfire Pass. Seen some action, mate. Bombed, shat on. Stukaed. I've seen plenty."

"Waiting to see the board now, are you?" enquired Jackson.

"That's right. Waiting to see the board. I'll have to put these in me pockets." The soldier put his shaking hands in his pockets. "I

feel like a right Charlie. You can reckon what people think, can't you, when I've got me hands in me pockets?"

Jackson glanced down at the soldier's shaking hands that were plunged deep down in his trouser pockets. "Well, you can't blame people for thinking that, can you?" he said in a reasonable tone of voice. "You look like the pocket billiards king."

"I feel like a right Charlie," said the soldier nodding his head.

"Are they trying to put you in the infantry, now?" enquired Jackson.

"Yeah. How daft can you get? I mean, I'd go like a bleedin' shot, but me nerves have crumbled. Can't help it if your nerves pack it in, can you? Mean ter say. It was the last bombing done it. You can only take so much, can't you?"

"You're dead right, old son," Jackson agreed. "Once is enough. One dirty big bomb is plenty."

"Wouldn't say that," argued the soldier. "I've been bombed dozens of times. Used to kill meself laughing. Mind, I always had the sense to hit the deck. But used to laugh. Never thought they'd get me, somehow. Well, you get to thinking like that. Have to, or you'd go spare. But one day..." The soldier furrowed his brow. "No night it was..."

"You stopped laughing," said Jackson.

"That's right. How did you know?" enquired the soldier.

"I guessed," said Jackson.

"You can only take so much." The soldier stared into Jackson's eyes. "What's up with you, then?"

"Nothing," said Jackson cheerfully.

"Nothing?" The soldier looked startled. "What you gonna tell them then?"

"The truth," said Jackson as he walked away.

The soldier stopped shaking as he watched Jackson walk away, then he turned to a soldier who had a very bad facial twitch. "Hear that?" he said. "He's gonna tell them the truth."

The soldier stopped twitching and stared blankly at the soldier who had stopped shaking. "Tell them the truth. Cor, 'e must be a bleedin' head case."

"Dead bleedin' right," agreed the soldier as he started shaking again.

"'E won't get away with it," snorted the second soldier as his face started twitching again. "A right nutter, that one."

Jackson marched out of the hut clutching his AB64 in his hand. He walked a few paces then halted and stared at his AB64, then opened it and read. "B2 base duties permanently." There it was in black and white. I was hardly in there five minutes, Jackson thought, and my whole future's changed. As far as I'm concerned the war's over. I'm B2 base duties permanently. No more desert for me. No more bombs and I'm excused the glasshouse. What was it the colonel said as he handed me back my AB64? Report to the RASC depot, Jackson, and if you have any trouble, or are worried about anything, come back and see me. Well, that's fair enough. If anybody climbs on my back I will. Not a bad old skin, the colonel. Very understanding. I suppose I shattered him by being honest. Maybe he was fed up with soldiers who howled like dogs, or shook apart at the seams. I spoke my mind and I spoke the truth, but I didn't expect to get away with it. How come then they graded me down to B2 base duties? The answer slowly dawned on Jackson, and his face split into a smile. Of course. I'm bonkers. They think I'm bloody well bonkers. Jackson laughed out loud and began running across the desert shouting: "Bonkers. I'm bloody bonkers."

13

What am I doing up here, Jackson wondered as the guns in the distance roared and the black night was split by the flash and the flames from the guns. "Must be hundreds of guns," shouted Jackson in the driver's car.

"Full-out attack, Johnnie," the driver shouted back. "Jerry's copping it tonight. A thousand guns so they say. Bet they're sweating. Fancy being caught in that barrage, eh? A thousand guns all along the front."

The truck bounced and bumped over the desert track. "How much further?" Jackson shouted.

"Don't know. Can't be much further. The Red Cap at the check post said the Durhams are further up along the track, so we must run into them," shouted the driver who was enjoying himself. Something to write home about this, he was thinking. The start of a real battle. Never seen so many tanks and guns and bloody troops. Something to remember this is. I'll be able to say, I was there. "Where are we, Johnnie?" he shouted.

"Don't know. In the bloody desert," Jackson shouted.

"Wind up your window, it's freezing," shouted the driver. "Know we're in the desert, you dope, but where? El something. What's it called again?"

"Alamein, or something," shouted Jackson as he wound up the window, shutting out some of the noise of the guns. "Who cares? It's just another part of the stinking desert." He stared morosely at the gun flashes on the skyline. Wonder how far away they are? Hard to tell. Getting too near them I know that much. "Jerry must be bouncing a few shells back this way," he said.

"You joking?" laughed the driver. "He's pinned down, mate, under the barrage. Can't move."

"Hope you're right," said Jackson.

• "Better than fireworks night," laughed the driver. "Brighter than day when those guns go off. Look at that cluster over there." He pointed ahead.

"Too bright," said Jackson. "I didn't think we were going right up to the front."

"We ain't," laughed the driver. "We'll be unloading the ammo for the boys who're going in soon. You'll see. Unload and get out again. That's all we have to do. Take it up, unload, and get out quick."

"If this isn't the front, then what is it?" enquired Jackson.

"The front's where them shells are dropping," said the driver. "Jerry's in the front line, Johnnie, cowering in a slit trench, taking it and wondering what's happening. By tomorrow, if we call off the barrage, they'll be in full retreat. Like to bet?"

"If they've got any sense," said Jackson, and tried to imagine what it would be like in a narrow slit trench with a thousand guns hurling shells at him. He shook his head. Can't take it in, he thought. Beyond all comprehension.

Once he had been caught out in the open desert, near a camp. A plane had dropped a few bombs, four or five at the most, and he had run to a small bush, a few bare twigs, and had laid down behind the bush. And when the bombing was over he had discovered that he had been chewing the bush and his lips and chin were covered in green sap. Bloody nearly ate that bush, Jackson thought. Bloody nearly ate my air-raid shelter. It's no good, I can't imagine a thousand guns trying to get me. Fancy lying down and having to take that. Throughout the night and maybe all day

tomorrow and tomorrow night. Until this new general . . . What's his name? Monty, something . . . who cares? Teetotal and a non-smoker, and smothered from head to foot in cap badges. Love the little leaflets he hands round. God is on our side. Hit the Hun for six, chaps. Well, he can't be serious. I mean, here's a thousand dirty big guns blowing their lids off. Hundreds of tanks standing by to go in. Thousands of troops waiting, sweating it out. Funny sense of humour, bet he's joking. Keeping up our spirits. Jolly good of him. He knows it's going to be a blood bath. Wonder how he feels? Confident, of course. Gentleman, pointing to the map with one of his cap badges, here is the plan. A thousand guns will open up along the entire front. Here, here and here, and that, I imagine, will catch some of the Huns LBW. The rest will be pinned down and unable to score. Then the tanks will go in and hit them for six. Here, here and here, gentlemen, and the infantry will mop them up by the tea interval. I know it's planned as a five-day test, gentlemen, but as I see it we should have them licked by about the third day. I know it's not considered sporting but as this is a test match and the final game in the series in Northern Africa, I think that some bodyline bowling is called for. So hit them dead in the centre, gentlemen, and make them drop their bats. Good show, carry on.

Jackson yawned and scratched under his armpit. Getting lousy, he thought. Not the first time. I'm crazy volunteering to come up here. I'm excused bombs, shells, battle noise and the screams of the dying, but then I heard that we were feeding bullets to the Durhams. Jock, Taylor, Hawthorne and Lynch are in the Durhams. I'm crazy. What the hell do I want to see them for again? Sticking my chin out for sentimental reasons. Dear old pal. Jolly old pal. Crazy. I didn't think about it at the time I volunteered, but they won't exactly jump for joy when they find out that I'm feeding them bullets. Ironical, when you think about it. I only wanted to see them again. How daft can you get? I should be back at base. They're going to hate my guts when they see me. "How much further?" he said to the driver.

"How do I know? Light us a fag. When the bloody convoy

stops, we stop. Hello, slowing down." The driver moved his foot to the brake pedal. "This could be it. See anything?"

Jackson opened the window and looked out. By the light of the gun flashes he saw an officer waving his arms. "This is it," said Jackson as he closed the window again. "Bolt is signalling for us to fan out."

The driver put his foot down hard on the accelerator, swung off the track and bumped crazily across the desert, and finally came to a halt. By now the convoy had made a complete circle, each vehicle staying about fifty yards apart from the others.

Captain Bolt, standing up in a jeep, circled inside the convoy and with his hands cupped to his mouth kept repeating at the top of his voice: "Bed down. Dawn reveille. Bed down now." As the jeep approached, Jackson wound down the window once again. "What's he on about?" enquired the driver.

"We can kip down until dawn," said Jackson as he shivered and wound up the window again. "Going to be a cold night."

"What about grub?" said the driver.

"Bully and hard tack," said Jackson. "Do you fancy it?"

"Could do with a mug of hot tea," said the driver.

"You don't light fires so near the front. Be your age. I'm not kipping down in the back. Too draughty," Jackson turned up his overcoat collar, "or sleeping on boxes of ammo. Know if there's any petrol wagons near us?"

"How would I know?" The driver sounded bad tempered. "So there's some petrol wagons near us. So what?" The prospect of a cold night trying to sleep in the truck cabin on an empty belly depressed him. He had expected to dump the ammunition, then pull out and head back to base camp and a hot meal and a few hours' sleep.

"When they go, they go," said Jackson.

"What?" The driver was still bad tempered.

"Petrol wagons," Jackson explained, "only need a spark to set them off. Strike a match and bang."

"You windy bastard," said the driver.

"I was chatting to Robson," said Jackson calmly, not the

slightest bit offended by the driver's remark. "He was in the back of his wagon loading petrol and do you know what? He suddenly stopped work and lit a fag. The crazy bastard. You couldn't see me for dust."

"Aw, shut up," said the driver. "They might have seen we got a hot meal." He settled down in his seat.

"The truck didn't go up in smoke." Jackson lit a cigarette. "I was amazed. Some of the cans were leakers. I still don't know why it didn't go up in smoke. Those guns make a racket, don't they? We won't get much sleep."

"Aw, belt up." The driver shut his eyes.

Jackson closed his eyes. Dear Madge, your hero has at last found his way to the front line. It is midnight, or somewhere about that time, and some mothers' sons, German and Italian, are being blown to bits. Cheer if you feel like it. Ring out for glory, let the bells betray the greatness of an unsuccessful day. Where did I hear that, Jackson wondered. Of course, the poet I met in Benghazi. I gave him a free booze up and a hundred fags. He claimed he was a poet anyway. Maybe he was. He got very drunk. Not a bad lad. Failure triumphant, hear the giggling ring of angle irons suspended on a string. Despair is laughing, lift the wounded up and toast them in a cracked enamel cup. All absentees may be excused everything. Unremembered as they lie 'ncath boxwood crosses facing to the sky. As near as I remember it, anyway. It made sense when I was drunk and still makes sense.

A cold night. A long night and a bloody noisy night. Hope Jerry doesn't come over and start bombing. I'm only making this one appearance up here. Be daft if I got knocked off. It's cold. Not the first cold night in the desert, but the last. When I get back to base camp I'll tell them, Jackson will go no more aroving. I've got it in black and white. Base only. They can't argue. If they do, I'll go sick. Pains in the head, sir, and I want to lie down. So make my bed. Cheer, Madge, you over-sexed nit, the enemy is being destroyed. The plan is being studied now by all the little generals, by the light of hurricane lamps. Foolproof or a complete balls up. Win or lose, it's a balls up anyway. Your lover with the

beautiful eyes, who didn't speak the language, Madge, will be avenged and thousands of others. Tonight.

Germans will kill British, and British will kill Germans, and the Ities will crawl out of their holes with their hands up and a smile on their faces stretching from ear to ear, and the best of luck to them. Clever lads, the Ities. Buckets of blood tonight and tomorrow, burnt out tanks, and the shallow graves. Wonder how the boys feel about going in? How do you feel about going in, Jock? Och, it's nothing. "You crazy bastard," Jackson was shouting. "You crazy Scots bastard."

"What's the matter with you?" shouted the driver. "Are you going round the bend? What are you bloody shouting about?"

"What? I was thinking out loud," said Jackson.

"I'm not making another trip with you," snarled the driver. "You're a bloody head case."

"You're dead right," said Jackson. "You won't be making another trip with me. This is my first and last trip to the jolly old front line. But you'll be coming back."

"Will you shut up," shouted the driver. "I want to get some sleep, you bloody head case."

"Must be," said Jackson. "I'm excused about everything except drawing my pay. I'm even excused guards." Jackson chuckled to himself as he remembered how he had wangled being excused guards. It was a bright moonlit night, and he was standing guard outside the guard tent. Half-asleep, and bored out of his mind, when suddenly he spotted a figure walking towards him about thirty yards away. Even at that distance he recognised Lieutenant Strong, who was acting as orderly officer. Jackson pointed his rifle at Lieutenant Strong. "Halt," he commanded, and Lieutenant Strong halted, and waited. You wait, Jackson thought. You bloody well wait and sweat it out. You've been trying to give me a hard time, so now you wait and sweat it out. Suddenly Lieutenant Strong shouted: "Give the order of command." You wait, Jackson thought. You wait and sweat it out. Again Lieutenant Strong shouted: "Give the order of command." You wait, Jackson thought. You are beginning to sweat now, aren't you. You bloody

well wait for it. My old Lee Enfield's pointing right at you. I bet you're wondering what the hell's going on. "Corporal," Lieutenant Strong shouted. "Corporal of the guard." Jackson chuckled gleefully to himself. He's getting the wind up. The corporal of the guard, still half asleep, stumbled out of the tent, buckling on his equipment, "Sir," he shouted back. "What's going on?" Lieutenant Strong shouted back. "What the hell does the guard think he's up to?" The corporal turned to Jackson. "Give him the old hab dabs, you nutter. Halt who goes there?" Jackson switched on a sloppy grin. "What?"

"You heard," the corporal of the guard shouted. "Give the bloody command."

"What bloody command?" Jackson shouted back. "I don't know what all this is about. I've never stood guard before. I told him to halt, and he halted. I'm satisfied. He halted when I told him to, so I'm satisfied. If he hadn't halted I would have shot him, of course. I've done my job so what's all the shouting about?"

While Jackson was shouting, Lieutenant Strong made a sudden run with his head down, grabbed Jackson's rifle and wrestled it out of his hands, and sent Jackson sprawling into the sand. "He's mad," Lieutenant Strong shouted. "I'm damn sure he was going to shoot me."

Jackson, lying in the sand, shouted back: "If I'd seen you coming at me I would have. You're not supposed to do that. You're not supposed to unarm the guard."

In a rage Lieutenant Strong threw the rifle to the corporal of the guard who caught it and inadvertently pulled the trigger. The rifle exploded. With a glazed look in his eyes, Lieutenant Strong said: "He had one up the spout."

"Of course, I did," Jackson shouted back, as he stumbled to his feet. "If I'm standing guard, I'm not going through all that old bull. Halt. Who goes there? Friend. Pass friend, all's well, or whatever old rubbish it is, I'm supposed to say. When I'm standing guard I'm going to be one step ahead, with a bullet up the spout, and if they don't halt when I tell them and stand dead still, until I tell them to move, then I shoot to kill."

All the guard had tumbled out of the tent by this time and there was a lot of shouting and questions.

"It's Jackson, sir," muttered the guard, who was still staring at the rifle held in his hands with a shocked expression on his face. "It's Jackson, sir," he repeated, and by the tone of his voice it was clear that he thought that that answered everything.

"Yes, it's Jackson," said Lieutenant Strong. "But why did they have to send him to us?"

"Shall I put him on a charge, sir?" enquired the corporal of the guard. He was slowly coming to and beginning to hate Jackson for dropping him in it.

"Yes," shouted Lieutenant Strong. Then a defeated look crept into his eyes. "No. It's a waste of time. He's half round the bend. Who the hell put him on guard, anyway?"

"The sergeant-major, sir," said the corporal of the guard.

"I'll damn well have a word with him." Lieutenant Strong looked grim. "He knows damn well that Jackson's a head case, and isn't to be trusted. Bed him down, but keep an eye on him. He'll have to parade with the guard tomorrow, 0600 hours, but examine his rifle first and make sure it isn't loaded. I don't want a bullet in the head and I'll make damn sure he doesn't stand guard again." Lieutenant Strong marched away still muttering to himself. "He's mad, of course. Stark raving bloody mad."

Bonkers, Jackson thought. Funny they haven't given me my ticket. I failed my clerk's course. That was a cushy six weeks, sitting on my backside taking down notes that didn't make any sense to anybody and I failed my driver's course by swinging off the road in a sudden panic and driving on the pavement, but I won't fail my storeman's test. Issuing grub, not a bad racket. Must get some sleep in. Dawn. Be damn cold. Wonder if the boys will go in tomorrow? I suppose the tanks go in first, after the barrage has softened the enemy up. How do you persuade anybody in his right mind to walk in with a rifle and bayonet with the enemy chucking everything they've got at you? Bullets and hand grenades. Mortar shells. Walking in. Unprotected flesh against steel. If they were all boozed up and fighting drunk I might just

about understand it, but walking in dead sober. How can anyone in his right mind do it?

Get some sleep in, you dope. They're all big boys and know what they are doing, or should. If they were all mad keen patriots, but they aren't. Not those I've spoken to, anyway. Kill themselves laughing if you go into a flag-waving, king and country routine, or tell you to belt up. Scared to be thought cowards, there's something in that . . . Won't sleep much tonight . . . Old Dodds managed to pull the King's Corporal fiddle again and is already made up to sergeant, and the quarter-master's right-hand man and bosom boozing companion. I nearly died laughing when I ran into him in Cairo. I'll be surprised if he doesn't make quarter-master . . .

It's going to be a cold night. Dear Madge. Oh, to hell with you. Don't know why I waste my time writing letters to you, you fall in and out of love too easy, darling. It's a Pole now. He was a baron in the old country, of course. Every Yank owns a ranch back in the States, and every Pole is a hand-kissing baron or count. You'll learn one of these days, maybe, my darling. You're too eager to make everybody happy. Well, nobody can say you aren't putting a lot of effort into your work. Wonder who will step in when your Pole gets bumped off? Another air ace. Don't you pick 'em. You must have a death wish, darling. Then the Kiwi, Stan, and now the Pole. Don't suppose he'll last any longer than the others. Well, it's a risky business, isn't it? None of them carry any insurance, how can they? I must write to her and suggest she starts planting little wooden crosses in the bottom of her garden, in remembrance. One thing's certain, my name won't be on any of them. You think too much, Jackson, maybe that's your trouble. Close your big blue eyes and try and get some sleep.

Jackson grunted as he lifted a heavy case and swung it towards two waiting arms. "Here's your bullets, chum." The case passed from hand to hand along a line of soldiers.

"Hurry it up," shouted the driver, as he handed a case into another pair of waiting arms. "Unload and get out."

"What do you think I'm doing?" Jackson shouted back. He was tired and cold after a sleepless night. "Cop this," he said, as he man-handled another case.

"Don't pass them down the line," an officer called out as he came on to the scene. "Double away with them to the trucks."

"That's the spirit," shouted Jackson. "Let's speed up production, chums." The sooner I get back, he was thinking, the better. Back to my dear old flea pit. Nice warm mug of tea first, then a long sleep. He lifted a case and almost dropped it as he found himself staring down into Cameron's eyes. "Hello, Jock."

"Let's have it," said Cameron.

"How's tricks then?" Jackson still held on to the case.

"Great," said Cameron. "Pass the bullets."

"See you when I unload, OK," Jackson passed the case to Cameron.

"OK. I should still be around," Cameron took the case from Jackson's hands and doubled away.

"Keep unloading," shouted the driver. "I want to get back to a hot mug of tea."

"Stop shouting," grunted Jackson. "All you do is shout. You're as windy as me. Worse. You try and kid on you ain't, but you're as bloody windy as me."

"I'll see you when we've unloaded," shouted the driver. "I'll put a set of fives on your bloody chin, mate."

"Step back," shouted Jackson as he pushed a case off the side of the truck with his boot. "Let's speed things up." He turned and glared at the driver. "I'll see you any time. You're a wind-up specialist. You don't fool me, old son." He heaved another case off the back of the truck and it fell into the soft sand.

"Get the truck unloaded," shouted the officer as he walked briskly down the line of men. "We haven't got all day. Hurry it up."

Or many more days, most of you, thought Jackson, or hours even, some of you. In a rage he hurtled case after case of ammunition on to the sand. It's a waste, he kept thinking. Good lads like Jock, and Taylor, and Lynch, and even poor little Hawthorne.

Going in there like cattle to be slaughtered. The waste. The bloody awful waste. It doesn't make sense. None of it makes sense.

The tea was scalding hot and Jackson cupped his gloved hands round the enamel mug as he stared down at Cameron's bowed head as he crouched down by the last flickering flames of the petrol and sand fire. "So you didn't make a Scottish regiment then, eh, Jock?" Jackson said.

Cameron shook his head. "They seem to be posting all the cockney boys to the Scottish regiments," he said with a slow smile. "But these Durham boys are no' so bad, though half the time I canna' make head or tail of what the hell they're saying."

"Just as well they didn't post you to the HLI or something," grinned Jackson. "If you had to go in wearing a kilt you'd catch your death of cold."

"Aye, that's so," smiled Cameron. "I never was crazy about the kilt."

"How's Hawthorne making out?" The tea was scalding hot and Jackson gasped as he felt it burning its way down to his stomach, but the warm glow helped to revive him.

"He's doing fine," said Cameron. "Mind, you canna give a stuttering man any responsibility, but he'll be OK on the day."

"When is it?" enquired Jackson after a long pause.

Cameron shrugged his shoulders. "When we get our orders."

"Pity Hawthorne's not giving the order to advance," said Jackson. "That'd put the campaign back about another month."

"Aye," Cameron allowed himself a slow smile. "But we dinna need another month. This time we'll go through them like a dose of salts."

"I remember Terry saying that in Benghazi, and you laughed, Jock."

"It was a laughing matter then. We had damn all equipment, but it's no laughing matter now." Cameron stood up and stretched himself to his full height.

"How do you feel about going in, Jock?"

"The sooner the bloody better. It's the waiting." He tapped his pockets searching for a cigarette.

"I thought you might be short of fags." Jackson handed him a tin of fifty Woodbines.

"Thanks, Johnnie. You dinna see many NAAFI mobile canteens up this way, and you canna count on the weekly issue. The boys will welcome a smoke." Cameron carefully opened the tin, extracted a cigarette, and lit it.

He's given up, thought Jackson. I've never seen anyone who seems to be so at peace with the world; I bet he's even decided on his own funeral patch. He's not scared. He's just not feeling anything. Will signed, last letters written. Calm and ready to walk into a hail of bullets. What the hell's the matter with people? Have they got something against staying alive? Living out their full life span? It's a beautiful old world. Even this stinking desert is bearable. Just being alive is enough, if the only other alternative is death.

"It's the waiting," Cameron repeated as he pulled hard on his cigarette.

"They could keep me waiting," said Jackson, "as long as they liked. The longer the better."

"No." Cameron shook his head. "No one likes the waiting."

He'll come out of it OK Jackson suddenly thought. Old Jock will be OK. The idea that his old friend and boozing companion could be killed just did not seem possible. Jackson owed more to Cameron than anyone else that he had ever known, and he suddenly realised this. Old Jock had never let him down, and never would. He did not want to get sentimental, but for a crazy second he had an urge to grab a rifle and go in with him, but he quickly dismissed the thought. Jock would be OK. They would keep in touch and one day they would meet up again, maybe in Cairo, or another town in another country. Maybe London when the war was over. Somewhere. Meanwhile, there didn't seem to be anything more to say. The driver was shouting, impatient to be off. There was nothing more to say. "So long, Jock, see you," said Jackson as he walked towards the truck. He was sure that he

would see Cameron again, and Lynch, and Taylor, and poor bloody Hawthorne. What a booze up that would be. They would all be OK.

Bright sunshine, and not far from the desert track, the graves, and on the graves the wooden crosses. Maybe two or three hundred boxwood crosses, standing erect in neat rows. Jackson noticed, as he moved aimlessly about the graveyard that the sand between the graves was soft, not beaten hard, clearly not many feet had trodden the lonely walks between them.

Jackson knew that his friends were buried somewhere in the graveyard and he was determined to find them, moving aimlessly. Then, with more purpose, he retraced his steps. Then, moving methodically, he walked from one grave to the next, glancing at the names and numbers and rank. It was twenty minutes before he found Hawthorne. Private, stuttering, Hawthorne, the skinny boy who had always wanted to keep out of trouble, yet was always in trouble. No more trouble for Hawthorne now.

Jackson stared at the grave and remembered Benghazi and Tobruk, and Hawthorne's screwed up face as he tried to jerk words past his reluctant tongue. He remembered their brief meeting in Cairo a few, short months ago and Hawthorne's joy because he was being posted to Aden and a new start. A new life. He was going to keep out of trouble in future. But trouble, as always, had caught up with him yet once again. He had not taken fate into account in the shape of RSM Hart, and base wallah, til the end of hostilities. Captain, all patriotic shouting, Rainbow. Pity about poor bloody Hawthorne. Pity. He did not get far that day when the attack had started. A few hundred yards and he had thrown up his arms, and, kicking frantically, had dropped lifeless with a bullet in his head. Others had dropped before him and many more as the day wore on. Pity about Hawthorne. Jackson was surprised to discover that he felt little or no emotion. They had never been real friends; who could be friendly with such a poor stuttering idiot. Pity about him, though.

Jackson moved on, glancing at the boxwood crosses. The names meant nothing to him. O'Neill. The name shocked Jackson for a moment. N. O'Neill. Norman, perhaps? But the number was wrong. They had not got old Paddy. Not yet, anyway. His luck had held out, as it had when he had wandered about the dust bowl called Tobruk, month after month, ignoring the flak and the shrapnel and the shells, whilst searching for his buried treasure. He had gone into action with a good drink on him, stolen from one of the officer's kits, and once again Paddy had had a charmed life. A fitter, thirstier, dryer Paddy, who for some months had known exactly where he was. In the bloody desert, worse luck. Taylor had related the news in a bar in Cairo. He had been enjoying seven days' embarkation leave. "The bloody beaches of Sicily, sportsman. Where else?" Taylor had survived. Good old sportsman Taylor had survived, and was fit, battle trained, cheerful and well.

T. Lynch. The name made Jackson swallow hard. Poor old Terry. How about that leave in Cairo? The drugs and the girls, and the hours under the showers. What a giggle that had been, and he had never made Tripoli, and never would. Terry had been a good pal. In some ways he had been a bit of a dope. What will I write to his girl, Jackson wondered, what can I say? He was always talking about you and loved you very much. Bloody lies. But what can I say? Jackson had put off writing to her for weeks because, for once, he could not think of anything to say. Perhaps I'll write to her tomorrow, or the day after, but in his heart Jackson knew that he probably would never write to her, simply because he could not think of anything to say. Judging by her photograph, she was a plain girl with a pudgy face, heavy breasted with a gormless round face and thin spindly legs. God makes them in all shapes and sizes, Jackson thought, with an inward smile. Well, someone else would have the farm. Someone else would lie beside her heavy breasts and spindly legs, and gormless face, or perhaps no other man would ever want her, even if she did inherit the farm. Shall I write to her, Jackson wondered, and send her the photograph we had taken in Opera Square? Terry and me in battle-

dress in Cairo on a winter's day, with a warm sun high in the sky.

Pity she isn't a raving beauty, Jackson thought. If she were, I would have written to her weeks ago. Soon found the right words to write to a raving beauty. No trouble at all. Send her the photo, and my deep sympathy and more letters, following her answer, pretty smartly, and who knows maybe I could have rowed my way in. Hold on. A farm would be bloody hard work, and I'm not cut out for that. No joy in calloused hands and an aching back and too tired to do anything but crawl into bed and snore like a hog. Anyway, she's not a raving beauty but plain, bloody ugly, and I should be thinking about poor old Terry, lying here under the sand, going rotten. They last longer in the dry sand, don't they? No worms.

Poor old Terry under the shower. Old Terry boozing it up and dreaming about Tripoli and the girls. No more. No more. I must write to the soppy cow, Jackson thought. That's the least I can do and I should write to his mum and dad. They've had the news, of course. A telegram. We regret to inform you that your son died in action defending England, and freedom and the politicians and the generals and a lot of old rubbish like that. Bloody nice news to find on the front door mat with Welcome written on it. They churn a few thousand of those out a week, I bet. The RAF boys, dicing with death, the matelots, sunk without trace, and the poor bloody infantry. Cameron. He had been dreading finding Jock's grave, and as he stared at the boxwood cross his eyes began to smart.

I was so sure they would never get him, Jackson thought. Not old Jock. The others, but not old Jock, with his crumpled face and battered nose. The others could go, Jackson thought. Pity about them, but they could be spared, but not Jock. He was special. They don't make many like him. "Stupid bastards." Jackson was shouting, and his cheeks were wet as tears splashed out of his eyes. Crying like a baby, crying soundlessly. "Stupid bastards." His voice carried across the desert and suddenly he was laughing. Laughing hysterically, but not wanting to laugh. For Christ's sake, he thought. What am I laughing about? There's nothing funny

happening here. Two or three hundred graves and the crosses standing erect, and the names, and the numbers, and the rank of the dead soldiers. Nothing to laugh about. "They didn't get me, did they?" He was shouting again and weeping and laughing, like a loony boy. "They didn't bloody well get me, and they won't."

In a sudden rage he kicked some loose sand on to the grave. Calm down, he thought, and for Christ's sake stop shouting. Of course they didn't get me, and they won't. They will never get me. I'll survive. I'll see them all bloody drop before they get me. The tears dried on his cheeks and he began laughing again.

He stopped laughing as suddenly as he had started, and stared at the grave. Nearby on the desert track, a lorry was parked and the driver was looking at Jackson as if he were crazy, and he was thinking, he's crazy. He's a bloody head case. I'm not having him as my mate no more. He's a bleedin' head case. Just look at him.

The solitary figure, standing beside Cameron's grave, looked lonely and forlorn.